



西尾維新

NISI OISHI

Illustration
take

ゴビツリ ハイスクール

ざれことづか 戯言遣いの弟子

講談社
NOVELS



9784061822672

ISBN4-06-182267-5

C0293 ¥780E (0)



1920293007809

クビツリハイスクール 戯言遣いの弟子
西尾維新

定価：本体780円(税別)

ゆかりきしいちひめ
「紫木一姫って生徒を学園から救い出すのが、今回のあたしのお仕事」

「救い出すって……まるで学園がその娘を拘禁してる

みたいな言い方ですね」

人類最強の請負人、あいかむしゅん哀川潤から舞い込んだ奇妙な

依頼に従って私立澄百合学園、またの名を《クビツリハイスクール首吊高校》に

潜入した「ぼく」こと「ざれことづか戯言遣いーちゃん」は

恐るべき殺戮の嵐に巻き込まれる――。

新青春エンタの真打ち、＜戯言シリーズ＞。

維新を読まずに何を読む！





Kubitsuri Highschool

目次

第一幕.....	狂言解系	11
第二幕.....	子狹の鉄柵	27
第三幕.....	首吊高校	53
第四幕.....	闇突	73
第五幕.....	裏切再繰	101
第六幕.....	極限死	123
第七幕.....	赤き征裁	153
幕後.....	鈴蘭の管れ	173

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Aikawa Jun

The contractor

Yukariki Ichihime

The client

Me (narrator)

The protagonist

Shisei Yuma

«Zig Zag»

Hagihara Shiogi

«Strategist»

Saijou Tamamo

«Yamitsuki»

Origami Noa

Dean

**When I screw up, everyone notices.
When I lie, no one notices.
- Goethe**



**Aikawa Jun,
the contractor.**

Prologue

"Even if it is a conclusion through probability brought about by the elimination of all probable possibilities, if it does not appear to be possible it must be impossible."¹⁾

Even though it was a weekday, I didn't go to university, opting to lie down on the tatami of my apartment room and read Mujuu Ichien's *Tsumakagami* instead. It was a slightly old book that I borrowed from Miiko-san next door, no, that's not right, it was clearly an old book. As such, I treated it with care, yet I only skimmed through it. Reading, in my case, is generally either for killing time or for studying, and on that day, it was the former. As such, there was no inconvenience when my door was knocked and my hands controlling the pages had to be stopped.

"La-i la la-i. Long time no see—."

Unexpectedly, the visitor was Aikawa-san. What was unexpected wasn't that the visitor was Aikawa-san, but rather that Aikawa-san actually bothered to perform a socially-ordinary task such as knocking — that's what was unexpected. But there was no meaning to inquiring as to why she bothered knocking, so I simply replied, "Indeed, it's been a long time."

Aikawa Jun²⁾ — profession: contractor, gender: female, height: extremely tall; she had a short torso and long legs. Her style, proportion, everything, was top-notch. She based red as her primary color for every nook and cranny of her body, which was a slight point of contention, but otherwise, she was like what you'd expect if you were to order "someone wearing a suit." Her hair style — she'd cut her bangs the last time I'd seen her, but it seemed it had grown, as her polished, red hair had reached shoulder length. She was the kind of person that a hundred out of a hundred people would say that she was beautiful — as long as they ignored her abnormally vicious eyes.

"Mmhmm. Oh, your finger's healed."

"Thanks to you. What are you here for today? Ah, please, feel free to come in."

"Ah, don't worry about that..."

Aikawa-san said, as she showed me a brilliant smile. It was rare to see such an expression from Aikawa-san — Aikawa Jun's smile was always filled with sarcasm and malice — so I lost my train of thought for a moment. Paying no heed to such a thing, Aikawa-san kept her smile as she placed a hand on my shoulder, kept smiling as she drew me to her, and still with the smile, was a black and square and heavy — albeit small — object resembling a stungun in her hand and she pushed the tip into my stomach.

Thud, a low sound echoed from my stomach.

"Ah! Guh..."

"...because we're heading out soon anyways."

As my eyes closed, I saw Aikawa Jun, who was not smiling at all.

¹⁾ A play on Holmes' "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." from A Scandal in Bohemia

²⁾ *Ai(grief)kawa(river) Jun(wet/rich) Pure love is "Jun'ai" and when you say her name Western-style it becomes Jun Aikawa, so some say it's a play on that + river = river of pure love



Me (narrator)
The protagonist.

The First Act

The Ruse of Dismembering String

There are only absolutes in this world.

1

... Huh?

I noticed that there was some sort of vibrating sound, and upon opening my eyes, I found myself inside a car. To give a more precise description, I was in the passenger seat of a Cobra painted completely in red. It appeared I was in such a strange place. So, the vibrating sound would be that of a running engine, which would mean that this car was currently in the middle of moving, which would lead to the conclusion that someone was sitting in the driver's seat. My mind did not go through such a needlessly elongated thought process, but in any case I glanced toward the driver's seat. As I expected, Aikawa-san was sitting there, whistling in a carefree way (the song was, terrifyingly, the first opening for *The Tale of the Heike*), with one hand on the handle, and the other playing with her bangs. Wind readily blew through the car's interior because of it was a convertible and she seemed to be fretting over her hair being tussled about.

"Hm? Ah, Ii-tan, you're awake? Good morning-."

"Yeah... Good morning," I replied, lightly shaking my head. "Um... where are we?"

I asked Aikawa-san as I watched the scenery zipping by. We seemed to be on the highway, making it hard to tell our current location. At the very least, I was sure we were not in my apartment anymore. Huh. No, rather than asking where I was, it's more appropriate to ask why I was in the middle of a drive with Aikawa-san. I could think of no answer.

"Huh... it appears my memory is hazy."

"Really- it was so troublesome!" Aikawa-san suddenly said in a loud, rising voice, as she turned toward me. "Hm. Looks like you've forgotten! I guess it can't be helped, since you were involved in **such an incident**, no one can blame you for losing your memory out of shock. After all, you were involved in **such an incident**."

"'S-such an incident', you say?"

She was even using **staccato standard equipment**.¹⁾

What...? It seems that I'd forgotten, but I had been dragged into some incident with Aikawa-san again. I understand, then my presence in Aikawa-san's beloved car was be a situation that would be considered natural and understandable.

"Right. And I can't explain it with a single word. It was a violent tragedy," Aikawa-san said with an extremely serious expression. "If I were a step slower, you may have died..."

"D-died?! Come to think of it, my head feels like it aches for some reason..."

"Yes, that's what happened after the enemy attacked you. No, not just any enemy, it was an **extremely strong enemy** that had quite some ability. After you became unconscious... ah, no, I mean while you were unconscious, I took care of everything."

With that, Aikawa-san spoke at great length and carefully explained everything that happened to me over the past three days to cover for my lost memories. While it was a story of only three days, it was at the same time a story about combat and warfare, tragedy and strangeness, a tragedy with bloodshed and lumps of flesh, and most of all, a story about love and tears. I had encountered death a multitude of times, and each time I was saved by Aikawa-san at the last

possible moment. Climbing through such a trail of death unscathed would be considered a miracle. If Aikawa-san was not narrating this preposterous tale, I would never have believed it.

"Is that so? Forgetting such a terrible incident... something is definitely wrong with me. Allow me to thank you once more."

"Hey hey don't be like that. It's ticklish," Aikawa-san shrugged her shoulders.

"We're close enough not to have to thank each other, y'know?"

And then she stuck out her thumb toward me, smiled brilliantly, and gave a light wink. She looked ridiculously cool. No, not just cool. What a wonderful person. There are not many people this wonderful. Perhaps I had been misunderstanding Aikawa-san all along. I had been thinking she was sarcastic and narcissistic and only looked at me as a toy, but this belief may need some revision.

"No, no, I will repay this debt. Not once or twice, I shall return it thrice, without any complaints, and I would insist so forcefully and relentlessly, and even if you were to refuse, without accepting no as your answer, I shall return the favor. Yes, if anything troubles you, please come to me."

"Really now. Ah, right... if you say you feel that strongly, I'd start to feel bad for crushing your pure determination..." Aikawa-san said, looking troubled. "Right. Come to think of it, coincidentally, in other words, it just happened to be the case, there's something I can only ask of you. Will you accept it?"

"Of course. Leave it to me. The user of nonsense will die for you."

"That's great." smiled Aikawa-san.

It had a hint of evilness in it.

"Actually, right now, we're in the middle of heading toward that place that I need your favor in. Umm, Sumiyuri²⁾ Academy. Know of it?"

"Of course; I have at least heard of the name."

"From the name then, what do you know?"

"Let's see..."

"Sumiyuri Academy. A special school for the super elite situated just outside Kyoto renowned for being even harder to get into than the harder of the hardest schools – in other words, for the ojou³⁾ type. Your grades and lineage and name were considered heavily, and some even called it **a school for training the privileged elite**, such a peerless development organization it was, and an ordinary person like I had no chance of even becoming acquainted with it.

"Hm. That's it."

"Yes. Schools are – not just Sumiyuri, by the way – secretive about their inner workings, so it is hard to find information leaks. What I said just now was just something I randomly heard from Kunagisa⁴⁾ once, too."

"Ah? What does Kunagisa-chin know? She's an ojou of ojou too, but she's a hikikomori, so school should be irrelevant to her."

"She's interested in the uniforms. Despite how she seems, she's quite into bloomers and school uniforms. She was wailing, *Uni-, Sumiyuri is the only school uniform I can't get-.*"

"Huh. There're things even *she* can't get her hands on. Sounds like some sort of miracle."

"No, not really, but she said, *While my eyes are black, I won't give up!*"

"She has blue eyes."

"So I guess she gave up. So, what about Sumiyuri Academy?"

"Ah, yeah. What I wanted to ask you a favor of – get into the academy in **that outfit**, and escort a certain student."

Having been told **that outfit**, I finally noticed that I was not wearing my usual casual attire. No, more accurately, I noticed I was in an extremely abnormal outfit. The upper half was a short-sleeve with a darker than black color, with a button placed over both the left and right of my chest and with a line of color that was abnormally large. It was what you would call a sailor collar, and it naturally had a colored scarf draped over it. And the lower half was what you could call a refined, and of the same color as the upper half – pleated skirt. Not perhaps, not maybe, not possibly, not even slightly, was it clothing for males.

"That's a Sumiyuri Academy uniform. Y'know, I wasn't really worried because you're flowery, but **that** really suit you. Your hair's grown out a nice bit, and if you let your bangs down, it'll be perfect. Not having any *characteristics* is really useful at these times."

"...Why," I asked, coolly smothering my slight confusion, "...Why am I wearing such a strange and fancy outfit?"

Is gender a theme this time? Human rights are a pretty annoying topic, you know. It is not something young people should really deal with.

"I changed your clothing while you were sleeping. But I had no choice, since your clothes were drenched in the blood of the victims. I totally wasn't intending to drag you into this, just so we're clear."

"I would not even think of such a thing. However, um, this outfit is extremely embarrassing for a nineteen-year-old male..."

"What're you going on about? Cross-dressing for detective work is quite basic in mystery novels. You can call it expected without fail, standard among standard. Even the esteemed Holmes cross-dressed on a daily basis."

"I don't know of such a person."

"Mugen Majiya⁵) cross-dressed in three chapters. Of course, I'm just talking about the adventure theater arc."

"I prefer the bizarre arc..."

"Even that ghost world detective wore a skirt when investigating a girls' high school."

"Are you saying that counts as an example?"

"Jojo cross-dressed during the second arc when he was infiltrating the Nazis, too."

"You're saying *that* counts!?"

"They say MacArthur was forced to wear skirts when he was a kid."

"Don't escape to famous historical figures..."

"Yamato Takeru no Mikoto..."

"You're not above unfastening the ropes around legends as well..."

"Zerozaki-kun said he likes cross-dressing as a hobby."

"Don't tell a lie that sounds like the truth."

"Hikari likes boys that cross-dress."

"Don't tell obvious lies!"

I can almost see white alligators...

Also, Aikawa-san likes shounen manga more than I would've imagined.

"How can I help it? It's an all-girls high school, so a guy can't go in looking like a guy."

"Well, yes, that is true..."

Wait, should I be saying **that is true**? I felt like there was something fundamentally wrong with a more obviously wrong thing at a very basic level.

"Ah, whatever. Shut up. Didn't you just swear you'd do to whatever I say?" finally Aikawa-san began threatening. "Ah? Maybe you lied to me?"

I swear that I did not remember having sworn away my minimal human esteem, but as Aikawa-san said, I couldn't ignore the debt I owed her. *I understand*, I nodded. After all, infiltrating an all-girls high school would not be easy even for Aikawa-san to do. Organizations called schools glide squarely upon the rails of rules. And we are referring to Sumiyuri Academy, so the problem becomes exacerbated. There would be a bit of difficulty in Aikawa-san wearing this uniform and infiltrating an all-girls high school (though personally I could not throw away my curiosity with regards to how she would look), and I would not be able to enter in my normal clothing. It was still a mystery why Aikawa-san chose me, but if I could help in any way, I might as well help. I was bored after all.

"Here's your fake school ID. You'll need it during the ID check going through the front gate."

"Ah, thank you." A photo of me was on the school ID. It seemed like this situation had been planned from the start. "Um... you said to escort a student? So is this job about finding somebody?"

Aikawa-san's profession – contractor. In other words, no matter how difficult a job may be, as long as she is paid, she will take the job and perform it. For example, she may be asked to solve an impossible murder case or collect information or smuggle illegal items or eliminate serial killers or even something like looking for a person. But is there anyone that would painstakingly seek out the contractor known under the title **Mankind's Strongest** for a mere search?

"It's a bit different from finding someone, buuuuut maybe it's a *bit* like that. Sumiyuri Academy is an all-dorm school with tight security. It's a big job just getting one person out from inside. I could just get in and start rampaging, but I was asked to try to raise as little fuss as possible."

As little fuss as possible – that would definitely be difficult for Aikawa-san. For a woman who goes by the thought-process of, "**it's faster to punch someone than to think**," even a logic-based impossible murder case can turn into a hard action incident.

"Anyways, Ichihime... that's the name of the student, by the way, rescuing the student named Yukariki Ichihime⁶ from the Academy is our job this time."

"Rescue... you make it sound like the Academy is locking that girl up."

"It's like that. Schools are facilities that lock students up, y'know? Of course, the people being locked up call that care."

Aikawa-san said, not explaining any further. It wasn't the first time for her to do something like that, as she did not reason anything from her profession, and did not like actions such as explaining or analyzing. **It is, in other words, just that–.** That type of simpleness was deeply ingrained in Aikawa-san's roots. For a person fanatic about logic, who believes that rules and tools (reason) are intertwined, it was a mindset that inhabited a place that I would never be able to reach.

"... Well, I won't ask about specific details. I'm not that interested anyways. I just – uh, Yukariki-chan, I think her name was? I have to find her and make sure she gets out safely, right?"

"I love you Ii-tan, you're so understanding. Ah, but you don't need to **find her**. We're going to meet up. Here, take this."

What was placed on top of my fake school ID was what I would guess to be a blueprint, probably of the interior of Sumiyuri Academy. On that small piece of paper was a single red dot symbolizing a location. It seemed that was where we were to meet up. It read **Grade 2 Class A**.

"I'll leave it to you to figure out how to get her out. Ask Ichihime herself about specifics... **she** will be able to explain better."

By the way '**she**' was said, I could tell there was a unique friendship between Aikawa-san and Yukariki-chan. It appeared Aikawa-san and that girl had some sort of relationship. If that were the case, this time it was half her job and half her personal situation, probably.

"And, finally this... the target's face," Aikawa-san said, placing on top of the blueprint a single photo. "However that was taken when Yukariki was twelve-years old, so you'll have to imagine how she looks five years later."

"Five years later, during her adolescence... Wouldn't she look much different?"

As I stared at the photo, I started to feel anxious. The cherubic smile of a girl in her preteens was shown in that photo. She was not laughing out of sarcasm, nor laughing out of innocence, nor laughing out of masterpiece, but rather just a pure smile. For a certain sect of men with a certain special taste, it would be unforgettable. To imagine her growth of five years based on the photo – a sophomore in high school – I was certain she had become quite a beauty.

"Why're you staring at it so much? Ii-tan, are you into lolis? Don't touch her, all right?"

"As if. I dislike younger people," I dropped the photo face-down on the blueprint. "Of course, if she had grown to be older than me, I would have to think about it."

"Your sexual preferences are too simple and thus they've become complex... Well, in any case, that's that. We'll still be driving for a bit, so feel free to sleep."

"Understood... ah, may I, one thing?"

"What?"

"When this job is done, can I take this uniform? Kunagisa will probably want it."

Aikawa-san cynically laughed and said, "Do as you wish." returning to focus on driving. That meant that on the highway to that point, she hadn't been focusing on driving, which was a terrible thing to know. I rubbed my stomach, which still had some sort of damp pain that would not go away, and decided to flip the photo back up to get another look at Yukariki Ichihime's face.

Hmm, I didn't really understand,

but she had an expression that stirred interest in me.

Yes, the aura she emitted...

"Perhaps I can, without saying any nonsense, enjoy this..."

I whispered so that Aikawa-san could not hear and placed the photo in the pocket over my chest.

2

What can the phrase 'a fine life' be referred to? Needless to say, an absolute value would require a clear line between fortune and misfortune. However, if one considers any fortunate situation to be unfortunate, then he must feel like he is

in the midst of misfortune. On the other hand, if someone in any unfortunate situation one perceives it to be fortunate, then they must feel like they are in the midst of fortune.

For as long as things are perceived to be fortunate or unfortunate, then all decisions from start to finish must rely upon individual perceptions. For instance, is the person who strikes jackpot in a lottery fortunate? Normal people would say he was blessed. But for him personally to feel blessed, they must have experienced the misfortune of **not hitting the jackpot**. If he is a person who has consistently hitting the jackpot, then that event would no longer be fortunate, but rather just a single blip in his daily life. Of course, the opposite also holds true. How many people truly bemoan the misfortune of not striking jackpot in a lottery?

As a result, people can only understand fortune and misfortune through relativity. This means there is truly no such thing as the word "equal." It means that there is nothing that exists so all things are perceived equally. Fortune and misfortune are connected, and by looking at things as a whole and not individually, they offset and become zero—

I thought of such tomfoolery as I walked down the halls of Sumiyuri Academy. I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but infiltrating Sumiyuri Academy was astonishingly simple. I did not like admitting it, but as you would expect from Mankind's Strongest contractor, the fake personal ID was perfect. I also did not like admitting my disguise was also perfect. Several times we had passed by other students wearing the pure black sailor uniform, and none had so much as glanced at me with suspicion.

Is it really all right for it to be this simple, I would almost think, but as the infiltrator, I had no right to complain. That would be a very 'the guilty are audacious' way of thinking. Instead I should be pleased, as this meant I could

wander around the Academy without being suspected of anything. Of course, I couldn't pull out the blueprint while I was inside the school, so I had to rely on my memory to reach the meeting place – the classroom for **Grade 2 Class A**. If a student of a school she had long attended was using a blueprint or cocking her head to the side while walking about, anyone would think something was wrong with her head.

"It seems like an ordinary school to me..."

As an ojou school as well as an esteemed school for the gifted, I had expected incredible sorts of abnormalities. However, if you thought about it, it might be incorrect to expect something extraordinary out of an educational facility. Still, I could not help but feel a bit let down.

"Since this is a request from Aikawa-san, I imagined something a lot worse than this... but this looks like the will go smoothly. Risky risky⁷⁾."

I don't think that I quite understood the use of **risky risky**, but that hardly mattered. I climbed the stairs, and then after losing my way for a bit, I found the classroom for the 2nd-year A class. There wasn't anyone around. What good timing. It wasn't like extreme stealth was expected of me, but I preferred not being noticed over being noticed.

However – I thought with one-sided suspicion – I was able to walk straight in through the front gate – now that was odd. To be able to enter that easily meant it would also be that easy to leave, wouldn't it? I had expected rules or regulations preventing students from leaving, but that didn't seem to be the case. So, Yukariki Ichihime-chan should be able to leave the school without needing Aikawa-san or my helping hand, I reasoned. Let alone being able to meet me meant that she was not restrained.

If I had given a little more thought at this point, perhaps the **bizarre** atmosphere covering this school – the aura that leaked out of it, that is – I might have noticed something odd about it.

However, I did not think that deeply, instead placing my hand on the door of the 2nd-year A class, opening the door and entering. The classroom was a perfectly ordinary high school classroom. Of course, I had never officially gone to a high school, so I couldn't say for certain.

However, that didn't matter. What did matter was that the classroom was empty.

"... Huh?"

How bothersome. I had placed quite a bit of excitement into meeting Lady Yukariki, so this was quite disappointing. Perhaps she was hiding somewhere in the classroom. If she was hiding, then where–

Huh. I felt like the locker for cleaning equipment shook a little bit. However, the windows of the rooms were closed, which made air circulation almost nonexistent, so what reason would cause the locker to shake on its own? Ah, so that means she must be inside. I see, a hiding spot that a high school student would think of as being the most ideal. She was probably looking at me from inside with a mischievous grin, expecting the person who had to come to pick her up would be standing dumbfounded, but I couldn't stand to be taken lightly. The me from three days ago may have fallen for that trick, but in these three days I had overcome ten to twenty thresholds of death, so I, who had evolved as a human, would never fall to a trick like that.

"Huh-? She's not here- this is bothersome-."

I mumbled, as I walked closer to the locker. Yes, if I kicked it with all my might, she would come stumbling out. Children who play tricks need to be punished. I stood in front of the locker, and just as I thought – left or right foot?

A chill.

I felt something cold on my skin. And at the same time, something was stuck against my back. It was fairly thick, and hard– like a gun–

“Hands in air!”

I raised my hands as commanded. I didn't turn. I didn't need to turn to guess who was holding me up. The voice was young – or rather, baby-ish, and belonged to a girl. And from its location I could tell she was significantly shorter than me.

I see, the locker was a decoy... I fell for quite a simple trap. That was an embarrassing mistake coming from a person who lived through cases of death. I would understand wholeheartedly if Aikawa-san were to tell me that story was a completely a lie.

“Who are you?”

In response to the question from behind, I answered quite calmly and light-heartedly, “An errand boy for Aikawa Jun.

“But I have no name to tell you. I am proud that I have only given my real name to another person once in my whole life.”

“...?”

In response to my strange answer, the feeling on my back lightened for just a moment. It wasn't something that could be called an opening, but I had been waiting for that moment. I twisted my body to the left. I was going to charge forward with the expectation of a mutual strike, but before I could fully turn, it appeared I had rushed things too much, since I tripped on my feet, and ended

up toppling quite clumsily. The **enemy**, of course, did not miss that opportunity, creating some distance and then placing the object to my forehead–

The object being, an alto recorder.

“...That's quite a greeting you have there.”

“I'm sorry. I've been taught that if you see someone you don't know, you should try to erase your presence and then get behind them.”

The girl said, raising the recorder and then flicking her wrist to hold it at an angle, like a conductor of a band.

“I... see...” I swatted the end of the recorder away and stood up. “... Then I will give you an adult-like greeting.”

I looked at the girl from the front. At the girl in a black uniform with a pouchette slung from her shoulder.

There was no mistaking that she was the girl from that photo. Yes, there was no mistaking it. Even though the photo was taken five years ago, she looked exactly the same. You could even say that she had never grown even an inch between those five years. She couldn't be called petite, as her entire body was small. Her face was more babyish than cherubic. And then– and then that innocent smile.

“I'm pleased to meet you, Yukariki Ichihime-chan.”

- 1) Referring to her saying "such an incident" in beat
- 2) Clear Lilly
- 3) upper-class ladies
- 4) Ku(nine)nagisa(beach) Tomo(friend), this name's a bit weird (it's played on later) in that it's Ku Nagisa, similar to like Da Brian. It's also an anagram of Kusanagi.
- 5) Mu(dream)gen(illusion) Ma(demon)ji(real)ya(other), also majiya is a way of saying "for real" in some dialects, although I'm not sure if that was intended
- 6) Yukari(purple)ki(tree) Ichi(one)hime(princess) I don't think this has a particular meaning
- 7) He uses risky risky but uses it in a way similar to "knock on wood," which is... not what it means.



Hagihara Shiogi,
«Strategist».

The Second Act

Shiogi's Iron Fence

Not here not here not needed.

1

Yukariki Ichihime – Hime-chan, that is – had been hiding behind the teacher's lectern.

"That seems like an easy place to be found... if I went to my left after opening the door, you'd be right there."

"That's why I hid there. No one would think a person would be hide in such a place. Master immediately eyeballed the **most obvious** place, the locker, right? That's how it is."

"....."

"What's wrong, Master?"

"..... Nothing."

Having completed our preliminary encounter, we had introduced ourselves, and Hime-chan said, "I want you to call Hime-chan Hime-chan!" with quite a shrill voice. Of course, I approved, as names are just monikers, but the problem was the alias Hime-chan had decided to give me.

Master.

This was no misunderstanding of the era. Supposedly, "a friend of Jun-san is like a master for Hime-chan!" How remarkably inexplicable. Furthermore, she

said like a, so there wasn't even a smidgen of respect. If anything, it felt more like she was making a fool of me.

"So, I have come to get you out of here and I was told to ask you for specifics on how to do that."

"Hm, I don't know what to say—" Hime-chan crossed her arms, and seemed to think. "There's like, not really any time-, and like, Hime-chan sucks at explaining-. How about just like, leaving this place?"

"... I see..." Lacking tongue, or rather, maybe more like lacking a brain, would be the way I would describe how she spoke, so it was difficult to consent to her suggestion, but maybe it was best to follow Hime-chan. It would be no use leaving Aikawa-san waiting outside forever, after all. "We need a school ID to get out through the front gate; do you have one?"

"Uh huh, I do."

Then wouldn't you be able to leave by yourself? I asked myself that question once more. However, it seemed like it would be futile to ask Hime-chan. Given the results of our five minutes' worth of conversing, I could see that there wasn't any hope in getting a useful answer. After all, my first impression of Hime-chan was a girl that I could not talk to in Japanese.

"Then... let us go."

"Yeah-," said Hime-chan as she slid behind me like a puppy. I had some level of wariness due to what had just happened with the alto recorder, but this time she did not point anything at me. "Choo choo go-!"

I tilted my head to fit the mood in response to her unsuitably cheery and carefree attitude, and we left the Grade 2 Class A classroom. "Quietly, so we draw little attention," I warned Hime-chan, and we began walking down the hallway.

All that remained was the simple task of returning from whence we came. I did not imagine any difficulties obstructing our way and felt that we were heading toward the end of a way too straightforward mission complete. Of course, I welcomed this simplicity, but I also felt apologetic toward Aikawa-san, as I was not sure this sufficed as a return of favor.

"By the way, Hime-chan, what is your relationship with Aikawa-san?"

"Ah!" Hime-chan shouted as she pointed at me, paying no heed to our circumstances. "Master, you shouldn't! If you call Jun-san by her last name, she'll get mad at you!"

"That is the point... Er, she's not here anyways. So, what is your relationship with Jun-san?"

"Um, like-. Around the time of that photo Master carries around, she saved me-. Like, five years ago? Kinda nostalgic-," said Hime-chan, who again seemed to care little about our situation, as she closed her eyes in remembrance. "Like a savior, I guess. Aaaaaaand, that's why Hime-chan's prepared to die if Jun-san orders it. But it's also proof that I trust that Jun-san would never say such an order, because it's not like I want to die. How about you, Master, what is your relationship with Jun-san?"

"A friend, a friend. Just a close friend."

It seemed that saying it a whole three times lessened the level of truth behind the words, since Hime-chan tilted her head to the side a bit, mumbling "hm". However, even I had no answer to that question beyond the suspicious reply I mustered. The relationship between me and Aikawa-san – I had never thought about it. We became acquainted by coincidence, and I would be summoned to help with a job, or she would use me as a toy, or make fun of me, and so on.

However, Hime-chan, while you think of Aikawa-san as someone you are indebted to, you are relying upon her again. Jeez, maybe you should learn from me.

As we were about to descend the stairs, two students came into my view. A pair of girls. Whoops, maybe I should tighten up. We should cut off our conversation, then walk nonchalantly by without making eye contact–

“Found you!”

One of the students shouted, blowing my thoughts out of my head. Her finger was pointed past me, at Hime-chan behind me. As I began turning to ask what was going on, Hime-chan grabbed my left arm, climbing back up the stairs dragging me along with her. Although the situation of being dragged along by a high school girl was rather embarrassing, I had no time to think about such things. While I was being dragged by Hime-chan, we went back up to the top floor, as if we were escaping from those two students.

As if we were escaping – or rather, truth be told, we were escaping from them. The pair of girls pursued. The two of them together ran after us with great speed. For what reason Hime-chan began running, and for what reason the girls were chasing, I did not know, but at this rate it seemed they would catch up.

– Found you!

Did that mean Hime-chan was being **looked for**? Aikawa-san said this job involved **finding someone**, but – was this related? No, it wasn't time to ponder such things. At that moment we were in the middle of escaping. What you need to focus on during an escape is figuring out how to not get caught, and that means being fast. That was it. And Hime-chan, who running in front of me, could not be called fast. If anything, she was slow. Extremely slow. Predictable, given that each of her steps was maybe half the average step.

"Excuse me."

I quickened my pace and caught up, then wrapped an arm around Hime-chan's waist and lifted her body.

"Ukyau!"

Hime-chan screamed oddly, but I paid no heed to it. As expected by her looks, or perhaps even more than expected, she was very light. Against other girls, holding this sack of weight wouldn't even count as a handicap, rather, having it run in front of me would be a greater handicap. And so I continued, quickening my pace, succeeding in losing the girls chasing us. Or rather, perhaps they weren't that focused on catching up, since after I ran around the building blindly, I noticed no one was behind us anymore.

"I think we'll be all right here."

Hime-chan said. I was carrying under my armpit, so I stopped and let her down. I glanced around, and did not recognize our surroundings. That would be expected after running around blindly so much. I wanted to look at the blueprint of the school, but I couldn't.

"... Phew," I had run at full strength without warming up, so my heart was beating hard enough to make me tremble. I was not tired, but I did want to rest. "... However, it isn't a good idea to rest in the hallway. How about that classroom?"

"Yes," nodded Hime-chan. "Master's pretty strong, despite how he looks-."

"Nothing to be praised for; you were just light," I said, sitting on the teaching lectern. "So, what... was that? Hime-chan, are you being chased?"

"Yes," Hime-chan said, nodding again. "Didn't you know? Hime-chan's, like, wanted by the school right now. That's why Hime-chan needed Master and Jun-san's help."

Hime-chan explained, with reasoning befitting a child. I hadn't heard anything about this. I see, that would explain the reaction of those two students. They had **found** a wanted person, so that reaction was expected.

She was not restrained, but that simply meant that she was **not yet** captured. Hime-chan hiding under the lectern was not mischief designed to surprise me. The students I had walked past en route to Grade 2 Class A did not look like they were, but were probably looking for Hime-chan as well. I see... **that was why** she needed the help of someone like me. At present, it was impossible for her to escape from this school by herself.

"Come on... tell me these things beforehand. If you did, I would have been able to come up with something... but we just got found right away."

"But Master was so confident leading Hime-chan out. I thought you had, like, some secret plan."

"....." It was *my* fault? Well, maybe if one looked at the situation with one eye it would seem that way. "Anyways. Hime-chan, did you do something bad? Being wanted, being chased, it seems rather violent business you're in."

"... Hmm. It's not like that, but," Hime-chan groaned. "Maybe it's the case from their perspective. Hime-chan doesn't dunno."

"Something like bullying, maybe?"

Not that Hime-chan looked like she was being bullied, no matter how you looked at her, but you cannot judge anyone based on their appearance. You might even think it would be rude to imagine that taking place in an elite ojou school, but even that would be simple bias.

"Bullying... would've been better, I think."

Hime-chan did not respond with any clarity. Or rather, it seemed like she was deliberately being vague. Her attitude was as if she were saying... **if you do not know, then you are better off not knowing**, like she was making an effort to look out for me.

"This school is somewhat strange. Of course, I knew from prior knowledge that it was special... but I feel like that isn't it all. Hime-chan. Will you explain everything to me?"

"Like, to put it simply, this is a high school."

"That's too simple."

"Then, I'll ask. Master... how much **prior knowledge** do you have about this school?"

"Aikawa-san asked me that as well."

I repeated my answer to Hime-chan. Hime-chan listened, nodded, saying and reacting the same way as Aikawa-san. "That's it?" she said. Well it would be exactly the same if you were to ignore the shadow that crept over her face.

"Then, Master, someone you know... or even someone that someone you know knows, or no, it doesn't even have to be someone you know, just *anyone*, have you heard of anyone passing the entrance exam for this school?"

"Huh? Uh... no – never."

"But that is just coincidence– is what you look like you wanna say – but like, how about anyone that can be called an alumnus – in other words, someone who's graduated from this school?"

"That... ah... ah?"

Huh. I could think of anyone. No – that cannot be true. Sumiyuri Academy is nationally renowned, and is a super elite school that feeds into famous universities worldwide, so there **should** be famous people who have obviously graduated – but I for some reason, not a single person popped into my mind. This – **this is, coincidence?**

"And that's that," Hime-chan said. "**No one enters and no one graduates** – such a school couldn't be called a normal high school, right?"

"But, Sumiyuri–"

"What?" Hime-chan looked like she was genuinely surprised and then she quickly composed herself. "Ah, Sumiyuri – the name of this school. Hime-chan forgot that. Come to think of it, the **teachers** called this place by that name – Hime-chan and other such **students** don't call **this place** by such a name."

"Then... what do they call it?"

"**Hanging¹⁾ High School...**"

That name with such a negative connotation left me speechless.

Hanging High School.

A closed organization that keeps everything private in the name of exclusivity and secretiveness while claiming cleanliness. The outside has no way of finding out what goes on inside. Just by placing the labels **elite** and **ojou**, you could add to the untouchable level of such a place. In other words, that means, **it does not matter what you do inside**, as that information will not easily leak out.

What – What did Aikawa-san ask of me?

Somehow – I felt like I had been dragged into an unreasonable, aimless incident. Once again I had, without realizing it myself, taken two or three steps into a preposterous location.

“Uwah,” Hime-chan moaned, quickly flicking her fingertips up towards the ceiling, and returning them to their original position. It seemed to be a habit of hers.

“Hime-chan is quite beaten. She was careless. Hime-chan thought Jun-san would've explained at least that much–.”

It seemed there was a misunderstanding in the level of information being passed. However, I could not blame Hime-chan. No one would expect that the person coming to save them – yes, “save them” was the right phrase now – that the person coming to save them was as clueless and unskilled as me. It was impossible to expect such a thing.

“But why did Aikawa-san not tell me that... I cannot carry out the mission without knowing at least that much.”

Yes, the blame lay squarely on Aikawa Jun.

That slovenly contractor was fully responsible.

“Hmm. But Jun-san probably also didn't expect things to have come to this. Hime-chan messed up a bit coming to the meeting spot, so the pursuit is a bit more extravagant than we expected. I'd been able to hide pretty well, but we were just seen. We can't stay in this classroom forever.”

“Can you not contact Aikawa-san? If there was a meeting spot, that must mean you were able to contact her, right?”

“When I contacted her, I wasn't being chased, so I just used the dorm phone.”

“Hmm...”

She was not wanting to leave the school because she was being chased, but rather was being chased because she wanted to leave – the better way to think about this. However, that made this place more like a prison. Or rather, it may not just be **like** in this case.

"I see–."

I said 'I see', but I still did not understand the situation. All I learned, was that this was not just a school – and it was an abnormal location that was not an elite school nor an ojou school.

"Abnormal... now this seems more like it."

However, if this is how it is – then this is my hunting ground. This was quite distant from what I had expected, but even if this was a mess that belonged to someone else, I had come along, and so I would see it to its end.

"Oh well. Let's hide here for now and think of a plan. There's nothing to worry about. If Master and Hime-chan don't show up for a while, Jun-san'll come help. Jun-san, despite how she looks, is a softy for people close to her, so she'll never just abandon us."

"Hide?" I hopped off of the lectern, then walked toward window, with my back to Hime-chan. "That is the opposite of what we should do – **since we were found**, hiding is bad. They already know we are inside the school. We need to plan accordingly, immediately."

I opened the window, grabbed a nearby desk, and tossed it out the window. We had run into the room with no reason behind it, so I did not know what floor we were on, but it seemed like we were on quite a high floor, as the sound of destruction resounded after a few seconds. Without a care, the chair that was paired with the desk, as well as the desk behind that, I tossed everything out the window.

"W- what're you doing?!" Hime-chan grabbed me at the waist. "That drew so much attention! That's like asking to be found!"

"I just turned nineteen this March–," I paused having thrown a sixth desk out the window, and then released the rather meaningless, weak hold of Hime-chan.

"But in those nineteen years, all I did was think about how to mess with people, how to escape from people. I have only thought of how to escape. I do not know what sort of place, **this place** is, but I do not allow myself to be obstructed from flight by merely **location**."

No one had gathered by the table and desk that had begun to stack over each other yet. However, it would be impossible for people to not notice that much sound – those looking for Hime-chan would of course notice. Then of course, they would have to search the classrooms above the objects. This classroom would be included, but so would the other classrooms. **By deliberately leaving a trace, I increased the amount of searching they would have to do** – too much evidence, too obvious of a clue – that sort of deceit.

"Anyway, this place is dangerous, so we need to move."

"... All right. But, Hime-chan doesn't come around here much either, so – Hime-chan doesn't really know the way."

"No problem, I've got a blueprint..." I looked in my pocket, "... that's not here."

Strangely, the photo of Hime-chan had also disappeared. Only the fake student ID remained inside my uniform pocket. It seemed I had dropped it when running about earlier. How ridiculous. After boasting, I immediately tripped.

"... Well, we climbed up, so we should be able to leave by going down. We can just go by instinct once we get out."

"... Pretty careless," Hime-chan said, exasperated. "But Master's more forward-thinking than Hime-chan expected. Surprisingly."

"Ah, well..."

I vaguely responded. Of course, I could not be called a forward-thinking person. Someone forward-thinking would not spend their nineteen years of life thinking of how to mess with people. If it was possible, I, too, would love to wait for Aikawa-san to come help.

However – I began to think. I wanted to prevent that darkened expression she made when she called Sumiyuri Academy the Hanging High School ever again. Not as a repaying of favors to Aikawa-san, but rather, I felt a sense of obligation.

Yes, I had probably overlapped myself. Yukarigi Ichihime and – a blue color that had once been called a savant.

That was why this was not just overly caring for Hime-chan. This was just self-satisfaction – no, even to me, it was just a case of autotoxemia.

Jeez. This was nonsense on an intolerable level.

I had not understood the scope of the situation at this point, and I had not understood the strength of the currents that swirled around me, and I was not able to tell right from left, so this tomfoolery could absolutely be called just rampaging, but even then, in a rare display for a single-minded, pessimistic user of nonsense like me, I felt like I would never regret this.

Even though that could not be the case.

Even though there was not one thing I did not regret.

"Even Hime-chan actually doesn't get some things."

In order to go to the floor below, it would be easiest to go back the way we came, but that would be easily anticipated. So the reason we arrived at our current situation was that we needed to find a different staircase – however, we could not find one. For a building boasting such a huge size, it was unthinkable that there was only a single staircase.

When I was alone, I used a route as according to a blueprint and did not notice, but this building was like a maze – it was designed like a labyrinth. Was this the reason I had a strange feeling about this place? It did not seem like it was constructed with that much care, but the whole building feel oddly crooked. Twisted. I became discomforted just by walking. The building seemed to have been built recently, but – this **construction** – just what meaning was behind it?

"From inside, you can't determine what sort of place – **this place** – is. Good or bad, high-quality or low-quality, blessed or unfortunate, you can only know that when you have something to relate with. So Hime-chan doesn't know how to judge this school, so it's hard to explain."

"... I think it is not something you need to think too hard about," I replied to Hime-chan, after having finally found a set of stairs and looking around.

"The **way** that **that** is, is actually trivial. The real issue is whether it suits you, whether it fits you. If you want to escape from this school, then I think that is fine. Those who wish to stop that are in the wrong."

Every human has at the very least the right to escape – well, I did not say that much.

“However – I know now that this is not a school that teaches ordinary things, but Hime-chan, what was taught to you over the past year?”

“Like I said. Like, **if you see someone you don't know, hide yourself and then sneak up from behind.**”

So that was not a joke in the place of a greeting.

Hmm. I had refrained from thinking about it, but in summary, Hime-chan certainly had control over my life at that time. Of course, you cannot kill people with a recorder.

In other words – this Sumiyuri Academy trains people with some sort of special techniques – a **nursing school** – a **training facility**, perhaps? Leaving aside whether it was legal or illegal.

There was a similar aspect to the Grand Integrated Single-class Research Facility that I had left, the ER3 System. There, of the organizations that wandered between the lines of legality and illegality, the one called MS-2 tried to strengthen the physical and mental aspects of people at the same time – they specialized in the **construction** of the **Seed of Orange**. Even if it were not as extreme, most organizations experimented with the functional limits of the beings called people. Even myself, a foreign student, received a set of specialized training. Even myself, who is a dropout.

However, if **this place** was to be **that sort of place**, then to maintain a facility of this size, to maintain secrecy of this size, it would need to be something along the level of the Kunagisa Institution. If that were the case, then becoming opposition would be a misstep. Yes, however, I had no means of just turning tail and running, either.

Jeez, this was like crying wine and selling vinegar. It was completely different from what I expected. It was not like I was dreaming of sneaking into an all-girls high school and enjoying a romantic outing with a naive *ojou*, but for this to be a place that taught wartime military somethings, that was too much. Though perhaps dogs are more delicious to eat than sheep.

"– Strange," I realized, after we had gone down a flight of stairs. "we had caused such a ruckus, but the school is oddly silent – I do not sense anyone in the building."

"You can sense people?"

"I can since I am easily frightened. I am fairly sensitive to looks and senses... but all traces of both have disappeared. I do not intend to be found, but I was expecting the need to force our way through... the other two had completely seen you, after all."

Even if they could not tell our exact location, should they not be having some sort of reaction?

"It's easier having no pursuit, isn't it? It's like sweet adzuki bean mochi."

"...? Ah, adzuki bean mochi from a shelf... No, leaving that aside. But to keep going down, it feels dangerous... Shall we go to the side?"

"Intuition? That sounds geometrical."

"I did not intend to say something unscientific," I looked at Hime-chan. "Hime-chan, did you grow up in America?"

"Woah! How'd you know!"

"... Intuition."

That aside.

This sort of pattern screamed ambush. Come to think of it, if they knew that Hime-chan's intent was to **escape from the school**, then they had no need to blindly chase her around. I could imagine that the other two had stopped chasing us because of that.

Then I would need to mess with them a bit more.

"... This is no good."

I began to enjoy this, just a bit. Even though I had been dragged into this pain in the ass. Even though I hated having to deal with pains in the ass and despised causing any disturbances.

Perhaps it was because of Hime-chan, I thought as we walked through a bend in the corridor. It was amusing, because it was so very me to blame someone else, but when I looked at Hime-chan, who remained cheery despite our having been forced to our wit's end, it felt foolish to become anxious or pessimistic or negative. There was no need to use nonsense to that end.

As I thought – similar. I thought.

The extremely infantile appearance relative to their age, their simpleness and their spontaneity. There were too many **parts** that were similar to **her** Was it just coincidence? I had thought that there did not exist another one of **her** sort...

I had an odd sense about things, as if the answer to $X \times Y$ had become $Y \times X$.

"Master, what's wrong? You're staring at Hime-chan so... ah! C- could this be...?!"

"No," I immediately rejected the notion. I had no intention of lowering peoples' perception of me any further. "However, what floor is this? Based on the view from the window, we weren't just a third or fourth floor. This is quite a tall building for something inside Kyoto... Though, I guess that does not matter too much this far out."

"They do say idiots and scissors like tall places-."

"I was about to accidentally let that slide, but you mixed stuff up."

Hmm? said Hime-chan as she tilted her head to the side... and it was at that moment.

Suddenly, a classroom door nearby opened, and four people – with the same outfit as Hime-chan and I, the black sailor uniforms – jumped out, consumed Hime-chan. Consumed. It was such a rough treatment that I could only describe it as such. Hime-chan had no time to resist, as she was slammed to the ground, and her limbs were pinned down.

"...!"

Ambush – it was a possibility I had expected, but why here? I could understand entrances to the school, but there seemed no meaning to having it in such a random place like this. That was why I had determined that this route was safe, and had stopped going down the stairs–

"– **because of that**, I see."

Shit. Leaving usage aside, that phrase was quite irritating when it is used against you.

And then what was most important here was that of the **four** who were waiting in ambush here, **all four** jumped Hime-chan. I was not particularly powerful, and I was not well-built, but I must look stronger than the childish Hime-chan. So for them to all ignore me and **take** Hime-chan meant–

There was still an **ambush** inside the classroom.

An ambush that surpassed the power of four.

"M- Master–"

Hime-chan began speaking, but her mouth was covered. The four did not so much glance at me. That also served to prove their trust in those remaining inside the classroom. That they had no need to worry about me.

This was no joking matter...

For me to lose in a battle of mind games.

"– Hagihara Shiogi?"

Introducing herself, she – came out of the classroom, and gazed upon me. Her icy stare gave me chills, as if she were evaluating me, looking at me simply. She was wearing the same black uniform as the four – in other words, she was a **student** of this school. Her straight, long hair that reached her ankles was abnormally beautiful, and despite the situation, I was charmed for a moment. Charmed I say, and she – Shiogi-chan emitted a mesmerizing aura, like the tip of a Japanese katana.

If you were to call Hime-chan blue, then this one, was like that red–

"Just in case, I am imitating something like a strategist."

"Hmm... a **strategist** you say," I nodded, and took a step back. I was probably feeling pressured by her. "Then, this would mean I was caught square in your **strategy**, I suppose?"

"... My. You are a boy?" said Shiogi-chan, as if realizing for the first time, based on my voice. "... It has been a while since I met a boy from the same generation. You four should take a good look, too."

Shiogi-chan commanded the four whom were pinning down Hime-chan, a rather inexplicable command – no. At the least, she called herself a **strategist**. There would not exist any **inexplicable** order. There might be some purpose to that action.

"Well – then. Keiki, Roka, Ami, Shuki³⁾ – take that girl to that place. Keep her limbs pinned, and don't give her any space. I shall take on this boy."

The four nodded at Shiogi-chan's words, lifted Hime-chan, and sort of dragged her to the stairs. I could not stop them. Not with an enormous obstacle in front of me.

I belatedly noticed that the two we had run into on the stairs were among the four, and I looked at Shiogi-chan and asked.

"... the four names – were they real? It seemed extremely fake."

"Huh – phew," without answering my question, she looked away from me, and sighed, as if she had completed a job. "Somehow, we were able to clean this up before Zig Zag showed up – it's good things ended safely."

"... are you not forgetting something?"

"Hm? Ahh. You? Yes yes..." Shiogi-chan made a smile that seemed out of place for someone of her age, turning to me with courtesy. "Yes, I shall accompany you to the front gate, so please turn around."

"..."

"I will give you a pass for this incident, so hurry up and get out – that is what I am saying, do you understand? Mister Cross-dressing Hobbyist."

"It is unfortunate this makes people misunderstand," I deliberately lowered the pitch of my voice. "I am not that kind and I really hate losing matches I think I can win."

"Quite the sore loser. We could get along."

But by the time she finished speaking, Shiogi-chan had already begun moving. With flowing leg motion – definitely that thing from martial arts – she grabbed

my arm and gotten behind me, and then locked up my shoulder joint. We had just begun, yet my movement had already been sealed. Even though she was such a slender girl. It would not be a good excuse to say that she had caught me off-guard. After all, she had specifically aimed at me being off-guard.

"I am a strategist so physical combat is not my area of expertise – however, I have been trained to an extent in self-defense."

"Do they teach even **that stuff** in this school?"

"My answer to that question would be that **they only teach that stuff...** but that is not good," said Shiogi-chan as she added even more pressure. The pain running through my shoulder increased. "Even though you are cornered, you've that insolent attitude... that is not good. Have you not learned the art of pleading for your life?"

A cold voice. An overpoweringly cold voice. I re-assessed this school. To call this a nursing school or a training facility would be too soft a description. This was exactly – exactly as the word means –

a battlefield.

"Now then, I am compassionate, so I shall pay my respect to you as a senior and give you two options – one is to submit to me. One is to dislocate your shoulder."

"– what country are you the president of?"

"No no, I am just a general of a mountain – although I am a strategist that could not even become like a general."

"That's great. A good match for a user of nonsense that could not become a user of nonsense–"

The pain in my shoulder grew. I like talking trash but she seems to hate being trash talked. Shiogi-chan was quite selfish.

"... However, there is just one thing I don't understand," Shiogi-chan said, as she loosened her hold. "Don't understand – in other words, a situation in which an uncertainty exists, is not good for a strategist. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, after all."

"..."

"Why were you able to infiltrate this school?"

Shiogi-chan asked. Not **how** but **why**. As if that was a question that would shake the foundations of this world, as if she was asking not for the method but rather the principle.

"... Nothing special. I used a fake school ID... and because I wore a uniform, so no one suspected me."

"Are you saying you were able to deceive the eyes of the students of this school with **just that**? That the security system is that low a level?"

Indeed – given what I now knew about Sumiyuri Academy, no, **Hanging High School**, my level of disguise should not have passed. Even if I could fake my gender by not speaking, outsiders should be easily identified and dealt with. It was understandable that Shiogi-chan would be curious. However, I had no answer to her question. I wanted to ask that myself, so maybe it was luck or coincidence, was all I could say.

"Don't tell my you're going to say nonsense like **it was luck or coincidence**—"

Said Shiogi-chan as she twisted my arm once again. From her perspective she was probably controlling the power she exerted, but as someone having their arm twisted, it made no difference. The other arm could not reach Shiogi-chan

behind me – and my heels were raised so I could not counterattack with my legs. It was a fantastic killing move that was impossible for a newbie.

Killing move. **That was why**, there were return moves.

"That is a terribly simple thing," I quietly said. "You are just unbelievably dumb, so you don't get it."

I felt like I could hear the sound of blood rising to her head. The next moment, Shiogi-chan twisted my arm a quarter more – and I heard the **snap** sound of my shoulder being dislocated.

"– Huh?"

The surprised, dumbfounded voice came from the person who did the dislocating, Shiogi-chan.

I turned the arm that had become free due to dislocation around, then turned to Shiogi-chan, who had not yet snapped out of her confused state, and used my arm that had not been dislocated to push her with all my might, with no holding back, from her chest. No matter how skilled she may sound, she was still in the body of a girl in her teens, so she flew like a rotting tree, and clumsily rolled down the hall.

"– ow!"

However, as expected of Shiogi-chan, she softened the fall and quickly raised her upper body, then glared at me. I casually ignored her glare, spread out my safe arm, and displayed composure.

"To the question you asked, I still can only answer that it was only a **coincidence**, so I will answer the question you probably have now – last month, I was dragged into a certain incident. At the time, I dislocated both of my shoulders. I forgot why I ended up like that, why I was injured like that... but anyways, when you get

something dislocated, the joints remain loose for a bit. So right now my shoulders are pretty easy to dislocate.”

“– Kgh,” Shiogi-chan groaned. “Then, you deliberately goaded me, to force me to dislocate–”

“You called yourself a **strategist**, did you not? I am known as something close to **that**, so I know very well. When even one miscalculation occurs, you become very confused. **It should not have dislocated with just that much strength** – I know that feeling painfully well.”

Or rather, what really hurt was my shoulder, but without showing that on my expression, as I slowly spoke, I was actually thinking **well then, what should I do next?** I was able to somehow escape from the submission using a surprise attack evasion, but that did not mean I was now in an advantageous position. If anything, I put oil to the fire. While Shiogi-chan remained confused, with eloquence and flattery, I needed to talk my way out–

I needed to talk my way out, because otherwise I would not be able to catch up to the four that had taken Hime-chan away.

“– what am I, a hero of justice?”

I mumbled to myself in a self-deprecating way. For me to save someone – for me to even think that. For me to even be in a situation for that. That's something that I couldn't imagine. Was I simply being tossed along with the flow? Was I just tumbling along with the situation rather than going with it as usual?

Shiogi-chan looked at me suspiciously, but then suddenly, she opened her eyes wide in shock. She seemed to be looking at something above me, and then behind me.

“– You're working hard, Ii-tan.”

Having said that in a nonchalant tone similar to **exchanging greetings because of a coincidental meeting in town** – the speaker placed a hand on my shoulder. It was on the dislocated shoulder, so it hurt like hell.

“– Aikawa-san... is it?”

“Don't call me by my surname – how many times do I need to tell you? Hmm?”

The hand on my shoulder bore down a bit more.

“Right – Jun-san.”

I did not take my eyes off Shiogi-chan as I conversed with Aikawa-san, who stood behind me. Shiogi-chan did not look at me despite being in front of me. Of course, she, being a strategist, would not do such a useless act. How could she do something foolish like consider mankind's strongest a side character?

“Hahahah – actually, I was worried about you being alone, so I came to help.”

“Seriously... why you couldn't intervene from the very beginning...”

“Let's leave that fun topic for later. So, what do you want to do? Uh, Shiogi-chan, was it? Do you not know about me?”

“... no, I know,” Shiogi-chan glared at Aikawa-san with sharpness incomparable to when she glared at me. Even though she felt she had the upper hand against me, it seemed she still kept some suspicion for me... it seemed. “The first thing we learned upon **matriculation** was about Over-killed Red.”

"That's quite the honor," Aikawa-san laughed at Shiogi-chan, with a joking attitude, as if teasing her. "– so? Shiogi-chan the strategist, what sort of strategy are you going to bring out now?"

"I'll flee."

Shiogi-chan said brazenly, and then she stood up. Her attitude, her expression, had not a shred of fear or panic. Indomitable – or more like insolence. This was the first time I had seen an **enemy** that maintained such an attitude in front of Aikawa-san. And this was from a kid.

It was abnormal.

"You think that you could get away?"

"I do – because the cross-dress hobbyist there is hurt," grinned and laughed Shiogi-chan. "That Over-killed Red is a softy for close friends – I *most definitely* know that fact."

"..."

"And, you," Shiogi-chan glared at me, "**What you did to me** – do not forget it too easily, please."

"What?"

Did I do something?

If anything I felt like I was the victim.

"Well then, have a pleasant day."

And then Shiogi-chan turned around and ran down the hall with her back to us, her skirt and long hair streaming behind her as she went. I thought Aikawa-san would pursue, but – with her hand still on my shoulder, she remained immobile.

"Jun-san, is it all right to let her run--"

I hurriedly tried to turn around to Aikawa-san, but then –

"Master-!"

I did not know where she appeared from, but a Hime-chan bodyslam prevented it. No matter how much of a light-weight Hime-chan may be, it was a complete surprise attack, so I was pushed down right in the hallway.

What're you doing you brat; are you some assassin after my life or something, I thought. But Hime-chan had big globs of tears dripping from her eyes as she sat on top of me, so I could not say such a thing.

"Uwaaaa... ah," Hime-chan hiccuped, and she touched my dislocated shoulder.

"Your, shoulder... I'm sorry, because of Hime-chan – Hime-chan, Hime-chan's..."

"....."

Um, when people touch my dislocated shoulder, it hurts–

Why, really, *why*, do you not, *understand*, that simple fact...

Hime-chan wrapped her arms around me, as if clinging to me, and I noticed that the sleeve of her uniform was slightly torn. It must have happened when she was pinned down by those four. Of course, Aikawa-san had saved Hime-chan first, which was probably why the strange quartet had been defeated – but Hime-chan could not have been left unharmed.

"... ah, th-this is nothing!"

She finally seemed to have calmed down a bit, as she noticed what I was looking at, as she tried to hide the torn sleeve.

"This is just an abrasion!"

"Sounds painful."

A scratch. Although they are similar words.

"....."

That was it, right.

An unfathomably bright, sunny, and innocent.

Naive, pure, yet still.

Yet still, decidedly not insensible.

In this way, she cared for others more than herself. She would feel the pain of others as her own. Even though there was no meaning to it. Even though me being hurt was not her fault. Even though it was my own doing in the first place, she would not acknowledge that. Never rejecting, not caring about particulars, as if embracing, as if warmly covering–

– no, wait.

That, was someone else.

Not Hime-chan.

Hime-chan, and her, are different–

"U, uwaah."

Her emotions seemed to resurface, as Hime-chan once again clung to my shoulder, as if to hide her tears.

"– I said, that hurts."

Different.

Yet, why.

These emotions that swayed like nonsense.

"Ichihime, get off. Are you gonna destroy Ii-tan's shoulder?" Aikawa-san grabbed Hime-chan's sailor sleeve and forcibly pulled her off of me, and then with the same forcefulness pulled me up. "It's nice to work hard but you shouldn't go overboard. If you dislocate it too much it becomes set wrong, y'know. Here, I'll fit it back in so hold still."

"...."

Hold still – she did not need to say that, as I could not move. Or to rephrase that, the moment I saw Aikawa-san, it was like an esper somewhere had placed a nasty curse on me, as my body froze.

Curse.

Indeed.

Aikawa Jun in a sailor uniform certainly had that much power.

¹⁾ As in, hanging yourself

²⁾ Her name uses extremely similar letters on the ends of her name - **Hagihara Shioji** (萩原子萩).

³⁾ These are all nonsensical names. Keika = "Roseroot Era" Roka = "Common Reed Flower" Ami = "More Buddha" and Shuki = "Red Joy"

**Aikawa Jun,
the contractor.**



The Third Act

The Hanging High School

Art begins with foolishness and ends with foolishness.

1

If you were to call one of these things unnatural – in this case, which was the most unnatural?

Me, a user of nonsense that was being used by nonsense? A contractor that was called the strongest without any proof? A girl named Hime-chan who wanted to escape from an abnormal school? Shiogi-chan and others who wanted to capture her? Yet within this area called a school, within the confines of the **Hanging High School**, it was hard to call anything outstandingly abnormal.

“–Hah. So... What to do?”

Aikawa-san mumbled after had taken off the scarf from her uniform, made a sling with it, and had set my arm. She mumbled, but as opposed to seeming troubled or bothered, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

I thought that Aikawa-san in a high school girl outfit wasn't bad at all, as I responded with a mumbled “indeed.” I had thought I would definitely find it odd, but apparently when you are as beautiful as Aikawa-san, it did not matter what you wore. It was like, hmm, well life is filled with hardships.

“We let that strategist girl get away, so my cover's probably blown. I was hoping I'd get away with it by using Ii-tan as a decoy...”

“Ahh... I'm sorry, for it being my fault.”

I immediately apologized, but did this person not just say something like, decoy?

"How troublesome-. What should we do-?"

Hime-chan too absentmindedly returned comments, lacking any sort of tension whatsoever. These two seemed to lack any sense of urgency. Leaving Aikawa-san aside, Hime-chan's lack would be a problem. Given that she had been captured easily before, it seemed she lacked the combat prowess of say, Shiogi-chan.

"Hime-chan, are you actually really strong?"

"Nope. Hime-chan doesn't need strength."

"The era of knowledge?"

"Yup. The wise people of old always said."

Hime-chan did her habitual action of raising her fingertips and then dropping them, then pointed a finger toward me.

"Illness comes from chi!"

"...."

Was she talking about **knowledge is power**?

It was certainly not the words of someone wise.

"Yes. Hime-chan is actually quite a failure. That's why Hime-chan hates this school and want to leave, but they won't let her. Hime-chan wishes they'd just let her escape, but they're, for maintaining secrecy, and stuff. That's why Hime-chan asked Jun-san."

"Relying on others."

"Ah, Hime-chan doesn't want Master, of all people, saying that to me-," said Hime-chan in a condescending way as she shook a finger. This girl was quite well-versed in hand gestures. "Ah, by the way, Shiogi-chan is actually the most talented of the **students** of this school. She's a third-year, an upperclassman."

"Hmm..."

"That's why, Master, you don't have to feel down over having your shoulder dislocated. Even if the opponent was a girl, there's a difference in talent, you know, talent. No, maybe it's more like a different level. No no, maybe not level but more like an atomic difference..."

"....."

This girl was sort of annoying. Was her true personality poking its head out because of Aikawa-san's appearance? Like her cover was slowing being torn apart and her true form was showing. What was the meaning behind those tears earlier?

"Hah. Anyways, let's give up on a forcing our way out the front gate," Aikawa-san said, as she raised her bangs. "Hagihara Shiogi – I'm not afraid of her label as the top of the school, but I'm not good with **that type of person**, so I'd prefer avoiding dealing with her."

"Ah, is that why you let her go? But don't you have opponents you would rather not deal with?"

"Yeah, of course. Full of confidence despite not having anything – filled with pride despite being completely empty – people with inconsistencies like that are troublesome. Because I don't get them." and Aikawa-san looked at me with scrutiny. "This includes you, you know? Ii-tan."

"Eh... but, that makes Shiogi-chan and I sound similar."

If anything I thought Shiogi-chan was the same as Aikawa-san.

"Nah, that's just the recklessness of the young. My haughtiness and her arrogance have different meanings. Even from that perspective you and her are similar. Especially the part where you both come up with strategies, and then fail because of them, it's so similar. Heh, strategist – nice joke. Anyways. I thought it'd be great if you could get Ichihime out of there... but there's no helping it since we've come to this. Let's do the opposite of the plan."

"Opposite?" volleyed Hime-chan.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Although you could argue that this is the more standard method, but – we're going on offense. Press forward to the faculty room and then talk to the **dean**. A negotiation for Ichihime's exodus.

"Simple, right?" said Aikawa-san as she curled her lips.

I couldn't even act surprised. But once more for another countless time, again, I felt admiration. If I had only thought about messing with people and escaping to this point, then Aikawa-san lived only thinking the opposite. To stand before the opponent and declare war, then boldly and proudly attack. She simply thought of that.

"But, Jun-san–"

"It's fine, Ichihime. I didn't like **that asshole** to begin with. You didn't like that asshole either, right? You could say it's a good thing we've been given the opportunity to bash that asshole. So, now that it's decided – let's go."

Having agreed to the idea that she had suggested, Aikawa-san began walking. Snapping out of it, Hime-chan and I hurriedly followed after. It was like it was

secretly agreed upon and decided who here was the protagonist and whom were the side characters.

Authoritativeness, thoughtfulness, and then assertiveness toward action.

Powerful conquest through indomitable strength.

Genuine confidence and pride.

There was no paradox when it came to Aikawa Jun.

2

You could say the road from there was like “Live with Aikawa Jun” and you would be 120% accurate and completely have comprehended it.

What was certain was that there was nothing in this school that could stop Aikawa Jun. Organic or mechanical, it did not matter as she took everything out with a single blow, and she mowed down, exterminated, repelled the obstacles that I assumed to be students from this school that appeared here and there, and the traps that were littered all over the school she cared not for as she stomped right into and through them, simply and brutally, with nothing but absolute power, sewing chaos and confusion here and there, and at the end of what seemed like the start of a hurricane – or rather the hurricane that was like the start of the end, we escaped from the building, walked through the outdoor connector hallway, and arrived at the back entrance to the **Faculty Ward**.

She was so overpowering that it was meaningless for a being like me to explain. As Hime-chan and I had been bothered so much by just a few students until Aikawa-san arrived, it was like we were nothing.

"You say **it was like**, Master, but really we're nothing. Hime-chan and Master, we didn't do anything getting here."

"If you are going to state such an observant thing, it's best to avoid using direct, emotional expressions. It is basic for users of nonsense to express things as vaguely as possible."

"Hime-chan isn't something weird like that!"

She said weird.

"But wow, Jun-san. She's even better than she was when I met her before. It was really like a flourish of a *happoubijin* (someone beautiful from every angle)."

"You mean the flourish of *hachimenroppi*¹⁾ (jack of all trades)."

"Ah, yeah. Master was the *happoubijin*."

"... How rude."

"Huh, so you deny it."

"Well... I guess that the being that is me may possibly have the trait of being a *happoubijin*, is something that I may or may or not or may or may not acknowledge."

"So does Master think?"

"Y'all need to shut up," Aikawa-san scolded, as she stood in front of the door to the faculty ward. "It's fine that you two are already friends... but doesn't it seem odd? I've been thinking the whole time."

"What exactly could be odd?"

"We've been attacked by students this whole time, just students. Isn't that odd? Ii-tan and Ichihime I can get a bit because maybe it's like practice training... but

now I'm here. Aikawa Jun, y'know? Isn't it manners for teachers or security to come greet me?"

It was hard to tell if she was being careful or being extremely confident. However as Aikawa-san said, we were only being obstructed by young girls, all wearing the black uniform... like Hime-chan, Aikawa-san, and I.

... Huh?

Like me?

"Um, Aikawa-san. Since my cover is blown, there is no longer a need for me to be in this outfit anymore, right?"

"Ahh... who cares, you look cute."

"... no, but..."

"Kyah. Ii-tan moe moe."

"....."

That made it really awkward to change clothes. Or rather, it was like she was forcing me to keep on wearing this outfit. I felt like she was toying with me, but in any case, I returned to the original topic.

Aikawa-san's suggestion – to strike the core in the middle instead of fleeing outside – relied on its absurdity to succeed. It was like a surprise attack. The opponents believed themselves to be the pursuers – they believed themselves to be the hunters. That was why it would be odd for them to expect being attacked. Perhaps they are still thinking that we are running around inside the school. Then, maybe it just meant that they were feeling overconfident? Even if the opponent was Aikawa Jun, it was not like they were being hunted–

"That might be it – ah, what a pain."

"A pain – but it's easier that way. The strong people don't show up."

"When I said pain, Ichihime–"

Aikawa-san took a big step back, then struck the door with the tip of her toes – and kicked down the steel door. Clang clang – the door sounded as it crumbled. ... It must have been rusted, right?

"I meant that we have to open doors like this. It's an emergency door that has no keyholes or anything, so we have to do this to sneak in like cockroaches."

"...."

I see, Aikawa-san preferred walking in through the front door, announcing her name and presence amid a brazen force. However not a single teacher showed up, so we were able to come here without being seen. And because we were not caught, we would be forced to keep sneaking, so we would have to enter through the back door, and that annoyed her. What a show-off.

"The dean's room's on the top floor. She really likes tall places – over here."

Unlike me, Aikawa-san had a perfect memory, so the blueprint was stored squarely in her brain, and she led the way down the emergency stairs and paths like a long-time tour guide. Hime-chan followed behind, uttering strange faux Japanese like, "Uuu. Fools and scissors are painful pleasure, yo!"

"We have to avoid the faculty room... ah, what a pain. I don't care about strategies and traps and such, gather numbers and force and use advantageous terrain and just bring it already."

"But then we'd go nowhere."

I did not know the past that was shared by Aikawa-san and Hime-chan, but given how they were speaking casually to each other, they must be very close.

Despite this being a reunion, they showed no signs of having been apart, and they did not even exchange greetings or introductions or even praise following the time apart. I felt like that expressed even more the level of intimacy between the two. Aikawa-san was like a big sister, after all, and Hime-chan was the type that made you want to take care of her, so if you were to say that they were a perfect match they I would have to agree.

"..... Hm?"

... no, wait. If that were the case, then am I not very much a pointless character? That's not good. That is a terrible punchline for having tolerated this outfit. I decided to ask Aikawa-san a question, to justify my existence.

"Um, from what I heard earlier, Jun-san, it sounds like you are familiar with the dean, so what kind of person is he? The dean."

At this point, I could only imagine him as some incredibly sick person. He gathered young girls and made them go through special training. What sort of harem is that?

"Origami Noa²⁾, turned 39 this year, and uh, asshole's a she."

"Origami, that surname..."

Yeah, Aikawa-san nodded with her head turned back over her shoulder.

"Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, and Origami³⁾. The bloodlines of the four gods and a mirror. Noa isn't a direct descendant though, as she's more of an offshoot branch, so her connection to the main house isn't very strong. This school itself isn't really related to the Origami house. If anything, it's more on Rule's side."

"Rule⁴⁾... that would be the Japanese ER3."

If you were to call the ER3 system a community, then Rule would be called a network, but that aside, what both organizations did was not too different. Then **this place** was a bit like the program at ER3... I suppose.

"Right. The story is that forty percent of graduates slide over into Rule. Others sorta scatter... The most talented students and such go to ER3 I think? Popular opinion is that they're superior anyways. That Hagihara's probably gonna end up like that too?"

As expected, unlike me, Aikawa-san knew of the inner workings of this place, and also knew of **alumni** of this place. Hmm, from what I gathered from general nuance, this place was like a place for **nurturing talent**. In that meaning it could be taken as a nursing school, and the label as an **educational organization** was not incorrect.

Still, however. Not allowing leaving, instead capturing you if you try to escape, making students call themselves strategists, and being called the Hanging High School - when you combine all of that, do you really end up with something that can be called an educational organization?

"Originally, this Sumiyuri – the main body of the Hanging High School was build by Noa's mom. At the time it was still relatively... well, relative to now, was a relatively regular school. But then a year and a half ago, that mom hung herself and died. And then once Noa inherited it, things went nuts. It's hard to explain what exactly went nuts, but–"

"The air went nuts."

Hime-chan said, in a rare display of precise wording. I could not see her facial expression – but it was probably clouded over again. Hime-chan is a second year now, so by the time she matriculated, the dean had already changed, I assume.

"For a while after **matriculating**, it was obviously a good-for-nothing school anyways, but it was tolerable. But the wheels started coming off... Hime-chan can't call a place where friends die a school."

"... is how it is," Aikawa-san said as she vigorously patted Hime-chan's head, and then continued. "But you know, the only way you can tell something's gone nuts is if you look at it from the outside. Unless you compare it to something, you can't tell the difference between abnormal and normal, so you'll obviously just assume you're normal. And then the school can never be seen from outside. Insanity permeates deeper and deeper – until it's out of control, and then we end up where we are."

"... was there no one else, other than Hime-chan? Students that thought this was **abnorma**, that this was **insane**. Students that wanted to leave."

"Ahh, yeah. A long time ago."

Hime-chan's nonplus answer was enough to silence me.

"Despite what I said earlier... I personally don't think Origami Noa's that bad of a person. I mean, I'm not gonna lie, I don't like her, and I'd love to give her some choice words. That asshole only looks at other people as a number, and can only understand death as a statistic. One person's death just means it wasn't two. Thinks numbers are everything, that asshole. But you know... that doesn't mean her ideals are really that off."

"An old acquaintance...?"

"Pretty much. We split ways two years ago, though."

That was why it was a two-year reunion, said Aikawa-san in a jesting manner. But I also felt that her behavior seemed a bit forced. Why Aikawa-san, who lorded

over the ability to fool people on a level dimensions above this user of nonsense, needed to act in such an obvious way I could not understand.

"But Jun-san. Please do not get swept away by your emotions."

"Who do you think you're talking to, man. We're going to talk about letting Yukariki Ichihime's departure. I know, I know."

"That is good."

I felt like a man who had performed his duty, and stretched my back a bit to stand a little taller, then turned to Hime-chan, who had been silent for a bit, and said, "Then."

"What are going to do when you get out?"

"..... Good question," Hime-chan answered. "I think I want to do a lot of fun things."

Her words sounded like they came from someone who had never experienced something **fun**.

"I want to live a fun life, where every day is a Monday."

"That is the worst."

I responsibly pointed out, but my soul felt as if it had wandered elsewhere. I felt like I had been prodded. Deep down inside me, at the weakest spot – an old, nostalgic feeling, was being prodded with relentless care. Truly... similar, that was not all it was. Hime-chan was very much the same as **her**. Then – I thought. This was a chance for atonement and punishment for me? I did not feel that I could nullify destroying someone by saving someone – though I did not know what it meant to save someone in the first place, though–

"Don't be dumb, user of nonsense."

Aikawa-san snapped at me.

"Alright, we're here, top floor--"

Aikawa-san effortlessly opened the emergency door. The all-rounder contractor Aikawa Jun, who displayed top-class proficiency at every skill. Even if you were to ask her to read minds, imitate voices, and pick locks, she would be second to none.

After a short walk down the hallway, a door that felt like it would be incredibly thick awaited us. It was not the type you would expect to see equipped in a school. Bulletproof? It was a steel door that almost seemed like it would be nuke-proof, such was its insulation.

Aikawa-san care-freely knocked (I wondered if Aikawa-san was having a "knocking is trendy" moment), but there was no answer. Of course. Then, and she went to place a hand on the door knob, but then she realized there was no door knob. Or rather, like the back door, there was not even a key hole. Instead, there was a fingerprint-check panel.

"Damn. Even I can't get through that."

"Really?"

"Even I can't just change my fingerprint. Hime. How are these?"

"All the doors in the faculty ward are like this," Hime-chan explained with detail. "It's designed so that only the teacher themselves can open the lock. They put a palm to the checker, then press, to lock. And then you place your palm again to unlock."

"Ahh. So there's no chance of a spare key... we shoulda brought Kunagisa-chan."

Indeed, had Kunagisa been here, she would have messed directly with the circuits and then unlocked the door really easily.

Speaking of which, did Kunagisa know about the secret of this school? When she told me about the school, she had not said anything of the sort. However she also disliked talking to me about these things, so it was probable that she knew and just did not tell me. In any case, if the school was like this, then obviously you would have trouble getting a uniform. I finally understood why Kunagisa had quickly given up on getting her hands on a uniform.

Hmm? Then how did Aikawa-san get a uniform (or rather, two of them)?

... Hand-made?

"Can you lock it normally from inside?"

"I don't remember. I think so, though."

"I see. Then, she must be inside. Acting like she's gone... asshole."

And then I finally realized that there was a security camera right behind us. I quickly told Aikawa-san, but she seemed irritated by that, snarling, "I already cut those lines." I looked more carefully and realized that the security cameras did not seem to be functioning.

"I already did all those little things before I went to save you two... I shut off the security alerts, too. Don't worry about silly things. Ahh, shit. How're we supposed to get in?"

"But if there was no response from knocking, then maybe the dean isn't inside?"

"Nah, Noa's like me, she doesn't care enough to run. Confining herself in a castle? Or maybe she just feels invincible... either way, she's obviously making fun of us."

Alright, now I'm mad, grumbled Aikawa-san, and then she took out what seemed like a black clump from inside her shirt. It was square, and was small enough to fit in one hand - most people would call it a stun gun. The brusque appearance caused primal fear in those that saw it.

"... How rare for Jun-san to be armed."

"Yup. This was a special case. I needed to drag someone out unharmed... well, whatever. Anyways, let's..."

Aikawa-san pressed the tip of the stun gun to the print checker, then flipped the switch. Sparks flew and made seeing difficult, and a moment later I heard a dull bddt bddt bddt sound. By the time I could see again, the checker had been crushed to bits. An uncomfortable smoke rose from the rubble.

"That, has a lot of power..."

"Yeah. It's a special hand-made item. I still haven't even removed the limiter. If you hit a person with this, it's dangerous enough to make them lose two, three days worth of memories."

Aikawa-san said, but that must be an exaggeration. No person would lose memories over that.

And Aikawa-san peered into the circuits at the back of the checker with an apathetic look.

"Hmm, the circuits fried pretty nicely. All that's left is simple... a Maizin-type⁵ circuit. Predictably ordinary and standard. Well, hang on a second."

And then Aikawa-san stuck her hand into the back of the checker, and then **mashed** stuff around with her bare hands. It looked like she was blatantly running the risk of being electrocuted, but maybe Aikawa-san has some special coating on her skin? After a bit, she said, "Alright. Unlock complete," and then

pulled the door open. That abnormal thickness implied that it was normally automated, but because the circuits had been fried, that functionality no longer remained.

"Hm. It's pretty heavy..."

Aikawa-san used both arms to pull the door to the side. Dsss, dssss, a terrible sound that you would never imagine came from a door echoed through the hall, as the door slowly opened.

"....."

But wow, that was some unbelievable strength. She did not display the behavior of a person who was about to begin conversing. She was clearly wanting a fight with the master of the room. Aikawa-san was a very belligerent, bloodthirsty person, so I felt tense, figuring **that sort of situation** would be inevitable. Jeez, for once I wish she would learn from a certain failure of a human. He was a really good guy.

"Jeez. Jun-san you're always like, headlong-."

Even Hime-chan, who adored Aikawa-san, had an exasperated look on her face. Although, that exasperation also seemed like a relieved oh good, it's the Jun-san of old.

The door opened about halfway, and after Aikawa-san, Hime-chan entered the dean's room,

And, found the twelve pieces of Origami Noa's dismembered corpse.

"....." "....." "....."

Upper torso, abdomen, waist, both arms, hands, both thighs, and both feet – having been ripped apart, the pieces that used to comprise Origami Noa, in too

gruesome, in too atrocious a way, were scattered about the room. The smell of blood, the smell of cerebrospinal fluid, the smell of meat. The rug and furniture that looked expensive were drenched entirely in blood. It was actually surprising the smell did not seep outside.

As for Origami Noa's head – it was dangling from the ceiling. Her long, black hair was tied to the fluorescent light on the ceiling.

It was like a scene out of a nasty snuff movie. Her face, stitched onto the head, looked more youthful than her age of thirty-nine, but that did not matter.

A head hanging from the ceiling. What other than fear and shock could you feel?

"– Anyone," Aikawa said in a quiet voice sans emotions. "Did anyone see someone leave this room?"

I stayed silent as I shook my head. Hime-chan did the same. None of us looked at each other. Our eyes were pinned to the dismembered corpse in front of us, as if they were truly pinned to them with nails.

"—... hah. They make me laugh."

Aikawa-san said with a venomous, barely-audible voice, and then she began moving around the room. Her shoes were dirtied by blood and meat, but she did not seem to care at all. Under the table, or perhaps inside the sofa... she investigated every place that a person could possibly hide.

Next, she walked past me, toward the door. I could not help but lean over her shoulder to take a look. She was checking the lock system. Aikawa-san had destroyed the outer section, so the inner section was relatively undamaged.

"Hmm hmm... I see. Nothing to do."

Aikawa-san mumbled, and I finally realized the reality that a gruesome corpse was splattered in front of a girl, Hime-chan. That was, however, too much – and yet, Hime-chan's eyes, which gazed upon the head dangling from the ceiling, were terribly cold.

"Ahh ah..." Hime-chan let out.

As if had she continued she would have said "huh, so I guess she died," it was that sort of impression. Without any interest, yet understanding only the significance of the happening, or perhaps as if she had just been told that it had already been extinguished, that sort of reaction.

"... it has **begun** after all."

"Hime-chan..."

"No worries, Master," Hime-chan smiled as she turned to me. A smile with a tad bit of darkness mixed into it. "I may be a failure, but I'm still a student from **here**. This isn't enough to shock me."

"... I see. That is good."

Not good. Not good at all. But I could not step in. Could not step in. I could not take the step in – to Hime-chan's soul. One sentence, "What are you thinking right now?" was all I needed to ask, and everything would be clarified, but I could not do that.

To interact with someone using true feelings unfiltered by falsification or nonsense means to wound each other. I did not want to hurt Hime-chan by clumsily stepping into her circumstances – and most of all I did not want to be hurt.

Anymore. In this situation.

Boom, came a sound from behind.

It was the sound of Aikawa-san closing the door.

"Well this kinda sucks – right?"

"Ah, yes..." I answered Aikawa-san. That was my way of, escaping. "The dean... being, killed. That takes away the point of having risked danger to get here..."

"Not that. Who cares about that. That just means we have to take a different route. There're infinite routes for getting what you need. Jeez – I figured something was up, we got to this room too easily. So that's how it is. That means that order is coming from **somewhere**, doesn't it."

"... What do you mean?"

"Ii-tan. The problem I'm having right now – is that this is a **closed-room murder**."

"– Hahh?"

I made an odd noise.

Because, of course? Well, yes, the door is controlled by the palm print, and then after you force open the door, you find a dismembered corpse and a dangling head – yes. The door is not an autolock, so it is a closed-room murder, that label is perfectly acceptable. But, who cares about that? The dean, Origami Noa being killed means talking through this, or rather even figuring out who the enemy is becomes the problem–

"Is this really the time to be debating whether it is a closed-room murder or not? Are you confused because an acquaintance was killed? Get a grip. This is not like you, Aikawa-san–"

"Don't call me by my surname. Only **enemies** call me by my surname." Aikawa-san glared at me. "I'm calm. You know, Ii-tan. I'm not just being prejudiced when

I say closed-room murders are normally **irrelevant**. I'm laughing at them because there's literally no meaning behind it. For example, the Karasu no Nureba Jima (Island of the Wet Crow Wing) case in April. What was the point of the closed-room murder then? That was just a closed-room murder for the sake of being a closed-room murder, right? In this case I'm not looking for how natural it is, I'm looking for the reason. Using the impossible to pull yourself off the list of suspects is one option, but no matter what you do, the nonexistence of proof cannot be turned into a nonexistent evidence. That sort of tomfoolery, there's no point to it. If you concoct a plan, you die by the plan – that's all there is to it."

Well, that is true, I think. However.

"But in this case we've got a big meaning. An abruptly out-standing meaning. Right, hey. How did we get into this room?"

"Well, Jun-san broke down the door—"

"Yeah. An obvious action of a trespasser... the actions of a suspicious trespasser trying to escape from the school. And then what's left in this room is a brutalized corpse. Isn't it clear who gets to be the suspect?"

"... Ah."

... So that is what the meaning was.

In other words, the **person behind** this situation – succeeded in **framing us for the crime**. By creating a closed-room murder situation. Ahh, indeed, in this situation, who but us could anyone suspect?

"Jun-san, this..."

"**We've been had**, in other words."

However Aikawa-san seemed to show no signs of humiliation, instead appearing to praise the schemer, cynically laughing, "Really, they make me laugh."

No... wait. This, were we more than, as Aikawa-san said, no, maybe worse-off than what she said? The sense of urgency had finally caught up amid my confusion. We were already being pursued by Shiogi-chan, but now we were being framed for murder of the dean—

Aikawa-san sighed, "oh jeez," and began gathering the dismembered parts of the dean that had been flung every which way.

"... Pretty rough cut. Blade... or more like a chainsaw, I guess. Yeah. If you think about the pain of dismembering a human, that would be best."

"The clumps of meat were flung around pretty wildly, so it seems like it," Hime-chan nodded. "Dangled her from the ceiling and hack and slashed away with a chainsaw, I think?"

The two conversed in a lighthearted tone about this – but is that not cruel? A chain. With that, a human body.

"Can that fluorescent light actually hold a person's weight?"

"If you distribute the weight evenly... maybe, I think."

"... gosh, what a pain, Noa."

Aikawa-san spoke not to me or Hime-chan, but rather to the head of Origami Noa dangling in the air. Of course, the head did not respond, but Aikawa-san continued, unperturbed. Depending on the angle from which you looked at her – she may have even looked saddened, despite her smile.

"You were so close to reaching your **ideal**... but these things just don't go as planned. But that's why it's fun, even though you wouldn't get what I mean... I

wanted to say one thing to you, but... whatever. I'll forgive you for everything now."

And the Aikawa-san crouched down one, then jumped, and untangled the hair wrapped around the fluorescent light. Thud, the head rolled on the ground, and Aikawa-san quickly scooped that up and placed it with the rest of the meat pieces.

"Hmph. Anything missing... well, some **connecting pieces** are missing. Anyways."

Aikawa-san – Aikawa Jun, beyond anything I had ever seen before, had a smile that was more sinister, more malicious, more horrible than any other.

"This is getting fun."

- 1) 八方美人 vs 八面六臂 Hime-chan has a tendency to remember one (or in the case of the illness comes from chi! line none of the) letter from a four-letter proverb and mix it up with something else that uses the same letter.
- 2) Ori(cage)gami(god) Noa, which was presumably from **Origami-Noa**
- 3) Aka(red)gami(god) - you may remember this from the first volume.
Ii(Tradition)gami(god), Uji(birth)gami(god), E(illustration)kagami(mirror). Hence, four gods and a mirror.
- 4) Rule is written 神理楽 (god/reason/play
- 5) Doesn't actually exist



**Saijou Tamamo,
«Yamitsuki».**

The Fourth Act

Yamitsuki

Ask God for a more detailed explanation.

1

And then three hours later – when it had gotten dark outside, Yukariki Ichime and Aikawa Jun and I were still in the dean's room. We had already become accustomed to the odor of meat and the odor of blood, and had finally settled down to the abnormal spectacle in front of us. Not that settling down to such a thing was anything worthwhile.

I did not know what Hime-chan thought of this situation, but she was flicking her fingers and playing around. It seemed like she was simply too bored, but maybe she was thinking, too.

As for Aikawa-san, she was the usual Aikawa-san, as she gorged on the rations stashed on the shelves in the room. Right now she was eating what seemed to be an expensive pastry. How could she eat such things with no problems at all in this situation, in this place? She must have nerves of steel, or is just insensitive. I wondered which.

“– Jun-san, how long do you intend to stay here?”

“Huh? How many times're you gonna ask that?”

Aikawa-san crawled on all fours to me, a cookie still stuffed in her mouth.

“What? You hungry? I know, I know, when you get hungry, you get irritable.”

“That is not–”

"Here. Ahhhh."

Aikawa-san stuffed the half-eaten cookie in my opened mouth.

Delicious.

"– that is not what I mean! We do not know how close Shiogi-chan has come, yet we are still sitting here – sitting at the crime scene, so they will suspect us even more."

"You're so hopeless! Why're you always like no this no that no that either no everything, so negative-. You Prince Negative. Ichihime, say something."

"Master. Political independents should sleep and wait-." ¹⁾

"What are you talking about."

This girl must be doing it on purpose, right?

"What she means, Ii-tan, is that in this situation, the worst thing to do is to wander around aimlessly. If we were to put this in shogi terms, we just got struck by a **check**, alright? It's not checkmate yet, but we're in quite a pinch. This requires deep thought."

"It is hard to tell a poor thinker from a sleeping one, or something, you mean?"

"Yup. So, a break, a break. Don't fret."

Said Aikawa-san, who then sprawled out on the floor. While dried by now, it was still blood-stained carpeting, so I could not help but wonder about her sanity.

"I think it would be easier to ask the police..."

"The police wouldn't come out for something like this. The dramatis personae are all messed up, and the school itself is like this, too. I feel sorry for him, but there's no place for Sasaki in this story."

"No, what do you mean all, I am an ordinary citizen. Please do not drag me into this. After all, I am a complete outsider this time, you know? This is what the police are for. Why do you think I am paying taxes."

"You pay? Even though you're a minor? That's rough. But Ii-tan, don't forget. The police are fundamentally a publicly owned company. They're protectors of the citizens who pay more."

Ahh, I see. And because this academy was backed by the Origami name and the Rule name, they are probably quite friendly with each other... I suppose in that case, the taxes I pay are like the tears of a sparrow. In that case, Sasaki-san and his partner would not show up. Well, granted, they did not have the right personality for this type of case.

"I will accept that... but staying here forever."

"And you know. I fixed the door and got it to lock again, so there's no place safer than this room. After all, it's the dean's private room in the Hanging High School. Sound-proof germ-proof bullet-proof, can you think of a safer place?"

"And in such a case, the dean was killed..."

Also, Aikawa-san's use of the word **safe** was purely based off the physical aspect, and it was doubtful she included the mental aspect. After all, who would think the fugitive Yukariki Ichihime and her companions would be resting in the center of the academy, and in the dean's room at the top floor of the **Faculty Ward**, on top of that? In that sense staying here would certainly be **going behind the enemy's back**.

However, if you were to ask me – this would not fall under messing with someone. Being unpredictable, or surprising someone, would not fall under going behind their back. That would be simply taking advantage of any oversight. And if you go into a **blind spot** recklessly, you become unable to move.

You become captive to the escape route. I had experience, so I knew. Well, of course, this explanation meant nothing here.

And to me, one more thing – something bothered me to the same level as Origami Noa's closed-room dismemberment.

'Somehow, we were able to clean this up before **Zig Zag** showed up—'

Shiogi-chan's mumbling at the time – I did not know whether it was from relief or a letting down of her guard, but her mumble that seemed like she forgot about her situation for a just a moment.

Zig Zag – it could not be some new Mobile Suit or something.

Then, **something** that even the strategist Shiogi-chan wanted to keep sealed, still remained somewhere in this school?

"You know... considering you prefer keeping things vague, you really demand results."

Aikawa-san said, irritated.

"... What do you mean? Even coming from Jun-san, I cannot allow that to pass."

"You once said **I am used to waiting** or something. Yes, you're pretty patient. You could probably sit on top of a rock for three years. But that's only when you know the result. When you don't know what's going to happen, you become anxious. You may be used to waiting for something, but you're really bad at waiting for something you don't know about."

"You make it sound like the truth."

"Because I'm speaking from knowledge. Your roots lie in **resignation** and **compromise**. That's why when you don't know what to give

up, who to negotiate with, like right now, it's probably hard on you. But you know, well, that. Yeah, you just hafta work at it, work hard-."

It seemed she had really become irritable halfway through, as she became apathetic. Work hard, she said, but I do not know what I am supposed to work hard at.

"No fighting- Master and Jun-san." Hime-chan butted in. "Let's be friends. Like, if we start kicking each other it's no good-."

"You're right. Friendship is a beautiful joy. Well, Ii-tan, if you want to leave this room, feel free. I don't intend to tie you up or restrain you. I won't reject comers and I won't stop leavers. But in that case, you're leaving on your own accord, so don't expect for me to come help."

"....."

"But you know, Ii-tan. Allow me this: the people in this academy, despite being in the middle of a completely pacified country, are sometimes those with goals, sometimes those with convictions, and sometimes those without any choice in the matter. They're all monsters who've stepped onto the path of danger."

"Monsters."

"Ii-tan, you seem to think of this place as a training facility or a nursing school, but while that's true, it has another purpose. Or rather, that other purpose is probably more important. In other words, this is a cover. Cover – in other words. While they're students, the top end are basically top-class soldiers."

Then... as opposed to being a school, this was more like a private mercenary army. An armed forces composed of young girls. What era is this story from, I had to refrain myself from saying. Of course, this was contemporary. However, still.

"If you underestimate them as younger girls, then you'll get your legs swept out from under you. While you're in this room, this Aikawa Jun will guarantee you and Ichihime's safety, so just settle down. Don't entertain me anymore."

"... How about you, Hime-chan?" I asked Hime-chan. "An opinion... or rather, any suggestions, do you have any? Knowing the terrain, you've been here for a year, after all?"

"Uuu. Hime-chan thinks it's best to leave it to Jun-san. Hime-chan's still an apprentice and a failure, and Master is a newbie in these cases. So I think it's better to listen to the professional."

It was reasonable. So reasonable that it made me sick. Of course, I'd never heard reason that made me feel better.

"I agree that this is the safest. If anything, this is like the core of the Hanging High School as well as a secret [grave]yard."

"You mean base."²⁾ The kanji are similar, I guess. "Apprentice... if you can evaluate yourself so well I do not think you need grade yourself so low."

"It's not grading myself low. People with odd powers tend to go overboard with it. Hime-chan feels this is a nice balance."

Overboard – eh.

Overboard becomes delusion becomes disappearance, they say.³⁾

It was true... if you unnecessarily have an extreme power – you use your power too much and go insane - I had seen a number of people like that. For example, the geniuses on that island, the failure at human. People who had powers rivaling that of the world itself, yet were in some way warped, people whom were balanced like that – although in that case I could only think of Aikawa-san.

"Being powerless is actually a source of self-explosive for Hime-chan."

"Why are you becoming a terrorist."

She meant self-esteem, probably.⁴⁾

"Balance—"

– in that case, what would that make me? According to Aikawa-san, **Full of confidence despite not having anything – filled with pride despite being completely empty – people with inconsistencies.** Would that make me the most unbalanced? But I am not warped. Am not. I think. I am pretty sure.

"I hope, that would be best."

I mumbled, and as usual, I muttered, "It is nonsense," and stopped thinking.

2

For example, let us say that there is a user of nonsense that has the conviction that murder is a bad thing. Then how should he respond when he is asked this?

What's wrong with killing people on the battlefield?

What's wrong with a serial killer killing people?

The answer would probably look a bit like this – that the existence of such things as battlefields and serial killers are wrong. Then how to respond when asked this?

Is it wrong for dogs to bite people to death?

Is it wrong for earthquakes to kill people?

Would he be able to answer that the existence of dogs, that the existence of earthquakes are wrong? Of course not, going there would be simple quibbling. Reasons that come from conviction and conviction that comes from reason are different things.

Situations where you must kill, or situations where you must be killed, without any shred of wavering or doubt exist. Yes, the reason to kill a person, that always exists as a sure thing. Even if there is no reason to not kill people, there are reasons to kill people. That is why the important thing is to avoid acquiring that reason, to crawl yourself through life – having come to that conclusion, I slowly opened my eyes.

This was an hour after then – Hime-chan was still flicking her fingers and playing around (is that fun?), and Aikawa-san had fallen asleep as she laid down – and I stood up.

"Huh? Master, where're you going?"

"... bathroom."

"Alright. I'll go, too."

What the heck?

I motioned for Hime-chan to stop standing up, and explained, "I want to act separately from you two."

"Separately...?"

"Yeah. I apologize, but I have grown tired of playing detective."

I lightly shrugged my shoulders. And then, untying the sling Aikawa-san had created for me, I freed the damaged shoulder.

"As Aikawa-san said, it appears I cannot stand these situations **when you don't know what's going to happen**. It is a new discovery for me. Shiogi-chan said something like **uncertainty breeds anxiety**, but... maybe it is something similar. I do not mind vagueness but I do not like uncertainty. ... Indeed, I am a rather narrow-minded person. In any case, I cannot stand waiting here like this any more."

"But..." Hime-chan pursed her lips, and looked at me in an antagonizing way. "C, can't you warrior, Master?"

Way of the Warrior, suicide?

Can't you wait, she probably had meant to say.

"That's messed up. Don't you get that we're safe as long as we're next to Jun-san? We can get out of the school easily if we leave it to Jun-san. What's the point in messing around with a good situation?"

"I am not debating this."

"No, you'll debate this. If Master messes around, then Hime-chan and Jun-san's well-being is endangered. For as long as we're moving as a team, Master's one hand, one move, two states, forty-three prefectures directly affect Hime-chan's future."

I decided not to play the straightman because we were having a serious discussion.

"I've thought about **that much**. Hime-chan. It is better for me to not be here. As Hime-chan just said. Hime-chan may be an apprentice – but I am a newbie that does not even reach that level. Negative pieces should be cut away."

"That's a dumb–"

"Indeed," I continued, forcibly shutting down Hime-chan's retort. "This may be nothing to Aikawa-san. Negativity of my mere level may be meaningless to Aikawa-san. But – I just thought. No, I realized – no, no, understood, perhaps. Being by Aikawa-san's side is safe. That is enough to make you even feel proud. Being by Mankind's Strongest makes you feel that way – but that is wrong. I do not want to escape from the battlefield for **such a petty reason.**"

A bloodied room. Splattered lumps of meat. The gathered parts of Origami Noa. Mankind's Strongest, sleeping on the floor silently without even letting forth the sounds of breathing. In such an environment, a defeated nineteen-year-old and a fugitive seventeen-year-old were engaging in an immature debate. How could you not call this ridiculousness ridiculous, and what would you describe as buffoonery if this was not buffoonery?

"Then – that would make me a petty thief. Scum that lives simply by crawling around the ground. Aikawa-san is enormous, so she should be able to give me at least that much – that is dirty, a parasite that has no feelings of sin or guilt. I have had a lot of things going on of late, so I had almost forgotten. What kind of person I was, and what sort of lifestyle I had pursued."

I will not provide anything to anyone.

Therefore, I will not receive anything from anyone.

I will reject anything and everything. That... was supposed to be the last shred of dignity I had.

"In this case, Aikawa-san's job is to rescue you... and it has nothing to do with me. Even though it has nothing to do with me, I am a bother instead. That is not good. I... do not want to have to repay that favor."

I do not have a will.

But I am obstinate.

"But, Master—"

"Stop calling me by that alias. I cannot become a friend of a person like Aikawa-san. I also have no reason to be called that by you."

I waved Hime-chan aside, who for a moment looked hurt, and headed toward the door. The lock was easy to open from the inside. But because the electronics for opening and closing the door had been destroyed, I had to move the door with brute strength.

Protected by Aikawa-san. Yet still not being a burden to Aikawa-san. Protect Hime-chan. Feel like you are protecting her, and become satisfied. And hold each others' hands. Friendly, cooperating.

Indeed, what a dream-like human relation.

Yet that was simply that, a dream.

Dreams are, after all, dreams.

"But, um... Master."

Stop, I said... what an over-familiar brat." I turned around, and placed a hand on Hime-chan's shoulder. Just a bit, I pushed – and displayed rejection. "Don't expect me to be nice. Don't expect me to be friends. I find those things – disgusting."

"– aa"

Hime-chan took a step back at my words.

See, it is simple.

It was that simple for trust to be broken.

And along with it, fondness crumbled, frailly,

And I would become alone.

"I am bored of acting like friends. This is my escape, Hime-chan. Similar to yours. Of course, this may confuse the enemies – so feel free to do what you want in the meantime. That is up to Hime-chan and Aikawa-san."

"Why, ... why, are you acting so distant?"

"Because we're strangers."

"But, Jun-san,"

"I do not want to be a burden on Aikawa Jun, I thought. Even if I am not worth even a shackle."

The truth was nothing that stoic, but rather just my stubbornness. From the result of the conflict between resignation and compromise.

Do you not know about me?

Do you not know how I feel?

Do you know understand me?

Hime-chan.

That is a truly wonderful thing.

Of course, Hime-chan was correct in this debate. I am wrong. I am wrong above and beyond whatever lay beyond the ceiling. But – I was at my limits. For the wrong me to continue doing the right thing, I had had enough. I could not make excuses over cracking past the limiting line. And I had no intention of doing so to begin with.

Yeah, that is what it comes down to.

The User of Nonsense, even when it came to Aikawa Jun, rejected friendliness.

"Because, but—"

"So, byebye."

I closed the door without letting Hime-chan finished. Yes, leaving Aikawa-san aside, Hime-chan's slender arms and thin body would not be able to open this door. Even if Aikawa-san were to wake up later, as she had said herself, she would not bother helping me, as I had gone off on my own. Actually, she may not have even been sleeping this whole time. She could fake sleeping easily. She was so good at deceiving others, after all.

Similar to the way she brought me here.

"— and what's amazing is that I can't bring myself to hate her..."

I probably liked Aikawa-san quite a bit. Although that is a thought, and far from a feeling.

" "

Even so, despite having finally realized that I had been tricked, I was not kindly enough to sit around.

And then Hime-chan. Yukariki Ichihime.

When I thought about inadvertently dragging her into the mess – my actions would make sense. It had just been a few hours since we had met, so I found my fondness for her ludicrous, but that was my thought. I did not want to think that I was simply doubling Hime-chan as **that**. In any case, I did not want to drag an irrelevant girl into my own game of confession.

"... so, this is the end of nonsense."

I had heard that the floor beneath housed the faculty room, so I tried to make as little noise as absolutely possible, and headed toward the emergency stairs we had used. Fortunately it seemed no one was around, and escaping from the faculty ward was simple. Now, where was this – I had simply followed Aikawa-san and did not comprehend the layout of the place. I did not know where everything was, and I did not know what route we had taken to get here.

"... Oh, well."

I decided to mill about. ... and if possible, I hoped to run into Hagihara Shiogi-chan. Shiogi-chan, according to Aikawa-san, **is similar to me**. I did not dislike running into such people – people whom are of the same type as I. I do not know why. Perhaps there is a silly part of me, that hopes that I could become friends with someone of the same type, that someone could understand me.

Visibility was bad. It seemed there was a lack of lighting – of course, because schools are not designed to function at night. It seemed Sumiyuri Academy – no, there was no reason to keep using such a name now – Hanging High School did not have night activities. Or perhaps, there just was no need to differentiate between noon and night.

"... but, there really is no one..."

Although Aikawa-san had beaten down a number of them, they were not the type to give up at that. It was unthinkable that there would be some sort of curfew... and the **faculty** were likely not to remain observers forever.

Then – I thought.

The suspect who killed the dean, Origami Noa – although it was debatable whether such a being could be called a person – the suspect, where had they

gone? According to Aikawa-san and Hime-chan, this situation had come about due to the dean's orders. In that case, you could deduce that the dean was killed after giving the orders. And the scent of blood, the feel of meat, was not that old. At the very least, it had not been over a day.

Motive – for this, there were enough to **gather and toss in the can. Origami Noa's hobby was being hated by people, being despised by people, being begrudged by people, being cursed by people.** ... A rather crazy person, she apparently was.

"Then a power struggle – would be the most valid."

And then to place the blame on fugitive and her accomplices. It was quite a good strategy. The morale of the students would go up for taking out an enemy. And if there was any hope for us, it would be that the dean's death was not yet widely known.

Ahh. So that was why Aikawa-san was staying where she was. As I belated realized the reason, the familiar campus sight, the building with **Grade 2 Class A** was in front of me. It almost felt like it had been forever since I was here, though.

"Oh, right. Photo..."

I could care less about the blueprint now, but I realized that I had dropped the photo of Hime-chan while running about, too. I decided to look around for it. Not that it was any useful either – but I could find nothing better to do. I could barely remember how to get back to the front gate from here, but I was not carefree enough to think there would be no traps there. And I had no intention of leaving the academy anyways. I just wanted to leave that room. From that uncomfortable room.

I said a lot to Hime-chan... but my true feeling probably was simply that I did not like being around Aikawa-san. That was all, a boring, petty pride. Not that pride is not petty to begin with.

"Yes... this is a rarity... that I am bothered by other people this much."

Perhaps that was how special Aikawa-san was. No, I felt like that was not the case. There is only one special person to me – and that one person is not here. The person here was simply similar.

I entered the building, looked for stairs, and climbed. There were no lights. It was dark. But I felt like visibility was better than when I was outside. I felt like that may be a case of concentration. Anyways, where was **Grade 2 Class A**... if I use that as a starting point, I felt like I could find the photo. Or perhaps the enemies had already collected it?

While I looked around for Hime-chan's photo, I thought about the mystery of the dean's room again. There were two windows aside from the door, but they were both obviously locked. They were double-locked, and could not be manipulated from outside. And places that someone could hide, Aikawa-san had checked from the start... hmm.

Come to think of it, there was something strange. A factor. The factor of being a sealed room had meaning, as Aikawa-san had said. Was the meaning to frame us for the crime? But then one more factor... how about the **dismemberment**? What was the point of performing such an eerie feat as dangling a neck from the ceiling?

Dismemberment using a chainsaw... the act itself would not take much time, but I also felt like it was not worth the effort to do it for the sake of it. Was it dismemberment out of enmity, or perhaps a different purpose... I could not

imagine that it was done just to dangle a head from the ceiling because this was the Hanging High School.

"**Dismemberment**..." Dismember, dissect, biotechnology, biology.

"... Reminds me of teacher."

Not that I wanted to remember.

Just as I had begun sliding into remembrance of my time as an ER Program student.

"Ssswaaayyyy..."

A silhouette appeared in front of me.

"... Ssswaaayyyy..."

No, that was a wrong form of expression. **She** was already in front of me, so dubbing that a **silhouette** was improper. I should clearly state **person**. However – in the darkness, the eerie and strange, swaying girl – I could not see her clearly in the darkness with my vision.

It was like she existed on a different dimension, as if she was blurred out, such was how vague her form looked.

"– Stop."

And her movement stopped.

She wore a black sailor uniform to go with her short-cropped hair. Her uniform was cut up here and there as if she had been assaulted by a hoodlum, but it seemed to be her sense of fashion. And from her hands that stretched out from the sleeves of that uniform–

"– Ahh. I'll introduce myself, for what it's worth, I'm – Saijou Tamamo-chan. A freshman."

Eliminator 00 in her right hand. Griffon Hard Custom in her left hand.

Tamamo-chan was wielding them – brusque, overly-dangerous large knives that did not suit the hands of a girl. Both knives were held with a backhand grip, and as if to display that this was a natural hold, she stood straight up and immobile and stared at me. A fogged, hollow existence, glazed eyes.

I screwed up, I thought honestly.

I did not expect blades to come out. I did not realize that this time it was **this** abnormal... The island that gathered geniuses and the serial killers were all normal compared to this. Just who could possibly keep up with this?

Or rather, this girl, from her clothing to her equipment, seemed to be asking for a straight-man, but I could not decide where to start.

"You know, it is already past school hours."

"That's not actually the case here-."

I whiffed.

But at least it seemed she could communicate normally, and Tamamo-chan narrowed her eyes and laughed. And then she began murmuring, "ssswaaayyyy... ssswaaayyyy," and shook her head lightly. Maybe she had a migraine, because she seemed strained a bit, as if she was tolerating some pain. Or perhaps she was just a bit anemic. She looked a bit sleepy, too. She seemed to notice my questioning gaze, as she said "ah" and straightened herself.

"Hmm? Ahh, this knife is just a hobby... don't worry about it."

"I, see..."

I discovered a lying girl.

"Ummm... right. I was looking for you guys... right. Huh? Weren't there three... of you? Am I the only one that can't see them? That's odd... glasses, glasses..."

"...."

Is this girl alright? In this case, this girl being alright directly related to my life or death, so I truly worried. It was like, cool and hip, or something, and she seemed like she was the type who could sprout wings on her back.

"Ahh. Umm..." she swayed and shook her head. "Oh well. I'll stab you twice or thrice and then think about it."

"You're mistaken, you know."

But she paid the upperclassman's kind pointer, and crossed the two blades in front of her small breasts.

"Shing! ... eheheh."

Tamamo-chan loosened up a bit and made a faint smile, and then blushed. She was embarrassed, it seemed. But her embarrassed smile was reflecting off the blades and so it looked like nothing other than an object of terror.

She wielded a knife in both hands – but that itself was not dangerous. After all, doing so restricts arm movement and makes it easier to read the attack pattern, and it obstructs defensive movements. For example in kendo only the best try their hand at double-wielding. But on the other hand that also means that if they are extremely proficient – then they can use two blades at will.

In other words, all or nothing – a newbie or a master. And in this Hanging High School, there should be no newbies.

"Tamamo-chan, umm–"

"I won't listen to pleas for mercy – umm, because it's a pain," she said as she crept closer with her unstable footwork. "And, it's our first time meeting, so don't add chan to my name. ... I'll **mince you to pieces.**"

Mince – to pieces.

Like the dean?

Like the dean – by **Zig Zag**?

"Wait – question. Was this strategy planned out by Shiogi-chan?"

"Wrong... Shiogi-senpai looked like she was scheming something... but I suck at that stuff, so I just came over."

Eheh, Tamamo-chan grinned. Her smile was cute, but I would have preferred if she had come in a group. Did this academy not teach cooperation? Learn cooperativeness more, Tamamo-chan. Schools are places to learn cooperation, after all.

"So, Tamamo-chan, away... sssswa... aaa... yyyy!"

And then from a standing posture, she immediately jumped toward me. The left and right knives were aimed to intersect at my neck.

Crap, this girl, was truly honestly serious.

Of course I could not oppose her, so I turned around, and then ran away.

"Ahh-. Running's bad."

She mumbled and, still gripping the knives backhand, chased after me. I thought I could outrun her because she was smaller – but I underestimated her. I am not a slow runner, but Tamamo-chan was just too fast. I felt like Kuchisake-Onna being chased by Hijiko-san. Shit, when I was able to grab Hime-chan and run

from two, I just had a good matchup. In other words, the battlefield's level had gone up. She quickly closed ground, and suddenly, Tamamo-chan's Griffon was flung toward my head.

"Wa- woah!"

I barely dodged it, in a stumbling manner. That was not a joke. That knife was clearly not designed for being thrown, but she threw it like a shuriken. What kind of arm strength did that girl have?

Or, rather, that her thin arms could wield those large knives was in itself abnormal. Did this academy not exist in a reasonable plane?

And Tamamo-chan placed her hip over my back, as I had slid along the floor on my stomach, and placed the remaining knife, Eliminator to my throat. If she flicked her wrist to the side, my carotid artery would not end well.

"... What were you supposed to say here... checkmate? Nah, that's not it. You don't seem like a King. How about... high-flying knights are food for pawns?"⁵⁾

Am I a knight?

What a half-hearted choice.

"Then, I'm going to like, ask you questions... so try to answer them honestly, please. Not that I really care either way, but the more honest you are, the longer you live, is how it works."

Tamamo-chan seemed extremely tired as she spoke. Not so much like the act of talking was tiring, but more like the act of living itself was tiresome, that sort of slovenly attitude.

"Umm.... ssswaaayyyy. Overkilled Red and Yukariki-senpai... where are they? To tell you the truth, I've been looking for them for a while."

"... a question from me, first."

"Ehhh? Nah that's not how it works. I'm the one asking questions," Tamamo-chan puffed her cheeks. "Ahhh. But whatever. Special permission-. Because it's a pain."

It appeared Tamamo-chan was not fond of speaking. In a debate, she seemed the type to let the opponent win just so she would not have to speak. Being a pushover is not a good trait for a young girl, but in this case this was an opportunity for me.

"... Are you **Zig Zag**?"

"Huhh? What're you talking about, no."

Tamamo-chan shook her head, almost as if she was insulted.

Wrong... then. Then, if this was wrong.

"I guess you don't really get what's going on? You were dragged into this by the red person without knowing about the school or anything, I think? Not knowing **Zig Zag**... wouldn't you look into that beforehand, ask."

She stopped talking, perhaps because she had grown tired from speaking. And then she mumbled, "ssswaaayyyy," and then finished, "around beforehand?"

"Unfortunately, it is a principle of mine to not step into dangerous matters."

"Huh. Then, a question from me... what's your goal?"

I actually thought that she was going to ask me again about Hime-chan and Aikawa-san, so Tamamo-chan's question caught me off-guard.

"Goal... that is."

"It's not to save Yukariki-senpai is it. It's not helping Overkilled Red, either. ... um, you know. Me, and Hagihara-senpai that you mentioned earlier, we're all doing this for a reason."

"....."

"But do you have a purpose to match that? Do you have enough of a purpose, that you can bring it to our faces, while we do this in this school? If you do, tell me."

"... Tamamo-chan."

"But to just reject it, calling it abnormal or unrealistic, that's cheap. Please don't deny everyone else's existence that easily," Tamamo-chan said, without any emotion behind her words. "Or maybe, you just love your own normalcy and valuation that much?"

That, to me.

This academy is messed up – but did I have enough to reject that? Did I have something not messed up?

"Ahh, whatever, too much of a pain."

Tamamo-chan gripped the knife again, in a normal way.

"Somehow or other, die, please."

The blade and my flesh created friction–

"—!"

Death.

I felt terribly calm. In a terribly calm way, I felt disheartened. Disappointed. That I would die this easily, in this situation... I had always thought that I would be

killed in a more, unbelievable, or a tremendous tragedy of the ages, or something. But to be killed in such a way, like a side character, like dying by being crushed under a crumbling building – no.

In a way, that in turn may simply be more fitting. The end of this diminutive insect. For a moment I thought of reflecting on my boring life, but even that thought was brutally dissipated, and–

Kunagisa Tomo. Only Kunagisa Tomo remained in my thoughts.

Ahh, Tomo, I wish I could see you...

Tomo, I wish I could apologize to you.

"___"

Just then, I heard footsteps echoing down the hall.

Quick footsteps, like someone running.

"...– Master–...Master-!"

Along with that shout.

Tamamo-chan was surprised, **recoiling**, and looked in that direction.

"Yukariki, senpa–"

Her hand – was separated from the blade.

I could not even look at Hime-chan to confirm that she was there, as I pushed Tamamo-chan off with my back and arm strength, and as I turned around I struck her in the stomach with my knee. Girls, younger, I did not have enough composure to think about that.

Tamamo-chan was flung right into the wall of the hallway – and lost consciousness. No, she was the type that lacked consciousness even when she was conscious, so maybe that was a bad way to express it, but in any case, she stopped moving.

I placed a hand to my neck – it was bleeding.

Specifically, by the skin of my neck.

"Master!" from behind, that line. "I finally caught up!"

"..... Hime-chan," I turned around, and then finally, saw Hime-chan. "Why are you here?"

"Ah, sorry," Hime-chan answered in between gasps. "Hime-chan couldn't open that door, so I was a bit late. And I never did get that door to open, so I came through the ventilation shafts. That place on the ceiling with the spinning fan thing. You can remove that from the inside. Ufufu, it's probably impossible for Master, but Hime-chan's small, so I was able to escape that way."

I was not asking about her struggles. Was there a ventilator to begin with? Maybe the impact of the dangling neck was too big for me to notice. Careless. Or rather, more importantly.

"... Aikawa-san? Is not with you?"

"Uhh," Hime-chan groaned like an animal. "I woke up Jun-san right after that, but. **Let people who want to do what they want do what they want**, she said, and then she didn't move anymore. She wouldn't even open the door for me. So I came by myself."

"Came by myself, but Hime-chan..."

"Master is wrong."

She said, bluntly.

She said bluntly, and looked at me straight on.

"You talked me down before, but, you were wrong. Not being able to be together because you don't want to drag them down is just cowardice."

"Harsh. But I will not refute that. Cowardly cowardice indeed. It is still preferable to ending up at a conclusion I do not understand. It is healthier. I have said it often and I say again that I am only thinking of fleeing. From enemies, and from friends."

What irony. I butted heads with that fortune-teller with a horrible personality, yet I sought more than anything else a clear vision of the future.

"Being able to think about **later** is proof of composure!" Hime-chan yelled, for some reason, for some reason that I truly did not understand, with anger. "If you're frantically trying to live now, then you shouldn't have the time to think about that! Master, maybe it's wrong to be coming from me, but aren't you just being lazy?"

"... You really are talking off now, Hime-chan."

I could tell my voice was rising.

"What – do you understand about me? What do you understand about a person that must be lazy?"

"At the very least I understand that you're a user of nonsense that keeps making excuses. Master, you know as well as I do, that you're just afraid of being by Jun-san," Hime-chan said with a challenging, taunting tone. There was a bit of a malice, a bit that included wanting to push me down. "You're just discomforted by being around an **enormous** existence like Jun-san, because it makes you feel like you're puny."

"Hey – wait. I do not see why you have to go that far. I–"

She struck me where it hurt, so I was almost at the point of arguing with her. I restrained myself at the very last moment, but it was truly at the very last moment. If Hime-chan was not not similar to **that**, there probably would have been nothing stopping me.

For example, the unchanging, unending, unbreaking Dead Blue. For example, the Seven Fools that were the closest to solving the world. For example, the artist that flouted discrimination and disdain. For example, the psychic that could only see that which could not be seen.

And then – mankind's strongest contractor.

"– What is wrong with that?"

One day, to be thought of as useless.

Somewhere, to be realized as being puny.

What was wrong with being afraid of being tossed by the roadside?

What was wrong with being afraid of being betrayed?

"Trust is sad. Trust is very sad. People live alone. The more you trust, the greater the force of betrayal. You break, you crumble, and you can never be back again."

"Even so, being alone is lonely."

"Even so, I will live alone. If you are to tell me that I cannot live alone, then I would rather die. To begin with, if you are gathering because you are lonely, then the more you find people you can trust, the more that person is just a lonesome person. Humans that live alone are pitiful and poor and grotesque and isolated – and above all respectable."

Like her, who was strangled.

"To generalize that as being lonely is blasphemous."

"Then Master, you're not lonely?"

Hime-chan said.

"Are you alone because you're not lonely?"

"...."

"Hime-chan was always lonely."

Ahh – really.

Do not look at me with such eyes.

True. Pure. Natural. Fondness. Caring. Truth.

Now – to me. To this me.

It is too late to atone for my sins, do you not understand?

I want to flee. I want to flee. I want to flee.

Flee. Desert. Evade. Scram.

Yes, like that time –

"– How many times do you want to make me repeat myself."

It was such nonsense – that I almost wanted to laugh. Even though I did not know how to smile.

Ahh... I see.

Hime-chan was not like that.

She was like the old that.

That was why I was shaken up by her.

That was why I wanted to leave the dean's room.

"What... nonsense."

Yet. It appeared I was still human, capable of not making the same error twice.

"Huh... –Master?"

"... No. I lose, is what I said. You are right, it is as Hime-chan says. At the very least, this was not the time or place to be selfish. Sorry, sorry. This debate is my loss... is Aikawa-san still in the dean's room?"

"Ah, y- yes!"

Seeing me acquiesce, Hime-chan's expression brightened. As if truly happy, such was her smile. The one being flashed it would hesitate, such was her defenseless smile. Indeed – guilt, had been locked away long ago, that was supposed to be why I abandoned it.

Yet, why, like this.

Why, like this, was I so stubborn? Even though if I could truly reject everything, I would be much happier.

Even though if I could commit suicide, that would be the best.

"Ah, but because we're talking about Jun-san, maybe she got angry and left on her own..."

"Ahh... that sounds plausible."

"Mor eimportantly, this girl."

Hime-chan carefully approached the unconscious Tamamo-chan.

"Yeah. She was a pretty dangerous girl. Ah, I had not thanked you yet. Hime-chan's arrival caused her to slip up."

"You're welcome," she said, as she dug through Tamamo-chan's uniform. What was she doing? I hoped it was not a strange hobby. "... Ah. She did have a wireless radio."

It was similar... to a cell phone, but it had very few buttons. It seemed like a wireless device for communicating among friends. It was palm-sized and seemed convenient for use... but so what?

"So basically, Saijou-chan, before she lost consciousness... she may have communicated with Hagihara-san or someone."

"That is bad..."

In other words, this place was no longer safe. However, the stairs were also dangerous for going to the level below. We may run straight into them. Bad. We had been cornered to an extent... we were not mice in a bag yet, but we may be approaching a pouch.

Hime-chan began pondering, "Hmmmm," and then after a while, "Oh well, it can't be helped, it's time for the secret weapon," and then she opened the pouchette that had been hanging from her shoulder.

"You know, that had been bothering, what is inside that pouchette?"

"Stuff. The Seven Tools of the Hanging High School. Not that I have seven things inside."

And then Hime-chan pulled out a few things that looked like reels. They were somewhat large for usage in sewing, but they were also definitely not for fishing. They were packed to the brim with string. No... could you call them string...?

"What is that...?"

"Lines. Well, I guess to be specific you could call it synthetic fiber or wire or string or something." Hime-chan said as she pulled out reels one after another from her pouchette. "I have platinum and titan wires. They're all scientifically enhanced to the best science has to offer now. This one's multi-purpose. I have a bunch, like Kevlar and aramid and carbon."

I had only heard of Kevlar. Material for bullet-proof vests, if I remembered correctly. I do not know if you could really call that string, considering how different its strength was.

"Other than that, it's used for space exploration and military stuff, it has a pretty wide scope of use."

Said Hime-chan, as she opened the hallway window, and then opened a window in the opposing classroom, and then began tying strings here and there. While they looked compact on the reel, each strand was actually extremely thin, and because of the dim visibility I could not see them without paying enormous attention. They were like spider silk, such that I felt like they would break just by touching them. I was about to touch one to test, but Hime-chan stopped me, saying, "Ah, you shouldn't."

"If you touch it the wrong way your finger'll get cut off."

I was the one that would be cut.

"Hmm... ah, this one is piano string. There are a lot of types of string. ... So, Hime-chan, what are you doing with this?"

"I'm making a rope. The window sill isn't enough to support both of our weight, so right now, I'm doing some calculating to make sure I get enough to support our weight."

"... wait. That means..." I stopped mid-sentence. "You want to rappel down to the first floor?"

"Right right yes."

"... Joke?"

"It's allllllllright!" she stretched out the word three times longer than it needed to be, and stuck out her chest. "Master, just act like you've been tricked by Himechan and give up!"

"That would just be being tricked..."

I said once,

"That would just be being tricked!"

I said twice.

I should have run.

I thought, a little bit honestly.

¹⁾ Not having any political affiliation is 無党(mutou), while nihilist is 虚無党(kyomutou).

²⁾ 墓地 (hakachi) = graveyard, 基地 (kichi) = base

³⁾ Hard to translate this, but it's a pun-based idiom. 暴走 (bousou) is overboard/rampaging/berserking, where 暴 (bou) means violently (in terms of extremity). So, 暴走 into 暴想 (bousou), where 想 (sou) means imagination, a bit of a pun on 妄想 (delusion). Finally 暴喪 (bousou) using 喪 (sou), which means disappearance, or in this case person-instigated disappearance.

⁴⁾ 自爆 (jibaku) vs. 自慢 (jiman), the latter being pride, the former being self-destruct.

⁵⁾ Shogi idiom - knights can jump over other pieces and get deep into enemy territory, but if you recklessly progress them they'll become easy fodder for pawns



Hagihara Shiogi,
«Strategist».

The Fifth Act

Betrayal Cycle

*Whether you can trust or not isn't a problem.
The problem is whether you're betrayed or not.*

1

In conclusion, rappelling while carrying Hime-chan succeeded. I had experienced doing this during my stay at the ER Program (at the time I carried a 50kg backpack), and the makeshift rope that used all sorts of string was sturdier than I expected. It took a while because I had to protect my was-dislocated-just-now arm, but I was not hurt, and we were not attacked on the way, so this could only be categorized as a success. After we landed on the ground, Hime-chan tried to gather the string she had used, but that apparently failed. She had tied the string together too meticulously, she said.

"These wires are rather useful. You can use them as rope like just now, but you can also make things like traps."

"Hmm... traps."

Come to think of it, tricksters use strings like this, I had heard. Stringmasters, wiremasters, I could not recall what they were called. They were not hitmen, but these could be used as weapons. Did that use the strings of a shamisen? Not that I really knew.

"Wire – I see, string. Hey, Hime-chan."

"What yes?"

"If you use string like this, the sealed room for the dean's room would work, right?"

Hmm? Hime-chan tilted her head to the side.

"A sealed room with thread and needle?"

"Something along that line. Sealed room, but it was not a physically sealed-off sealed room. There are always slits and holes. Then even without entering the room, even if locked, you could succeed by manipulating the string. There was the ventilation shaft Hime-chan used, too. In any case, if you use string like this, you could wrap it around the dean inside the room, and then pull. And then you get a minced dean... right?"

"Impossible. That's."

"No no, you can't know unless you try."

"I know. Master, you're thinking positive about the wrong thing." Hime-chan walked to my side, having given up on retrieving the string. "First, how did the suspect hang the dean's neck from the ceiling? That's impossible without goign into the room."

"Ah, right..."

In the first place, wrapping string around the dean's body means you have to enter the room once, anyways."

"Right..., no, wait, hold on. If there is a ventilation shaft, then it is not a sealed room. If they enter from there and then leave from there..."

"You can't go in. I told you, right? The fan is nailed to the ceiling, so you can't enter, and you can't put it back when you're leaving. Even if they were invited in,

they can't lock the door from the window or the ventilation shaft. Jun-san's checked that much. Didn't you notice?"

"Hmm..."

I did not.

In any case, that meant the ventilation shaft was no good. The palm-print lock was unmistakable (even that Jun-san had to resort to brute force to open it), so that meant the window, or the ventilation shaft, but.

"Any you know. You can use this sort of string to slice up a person nice and easy, but in that case you'd have clean cuts. You wouldn't end up with such rough edges."

Ahh. Right, the weapon was a chainsaw. If Aikawa-san decided as such, then that was probably correct. Contractor, Aikawa Jun. The number of corpses she had seen was probably on a different digit from me.

"Chainsaw... eh. Huh. Wait, Hime-chan. I was half-joking when I said it, ... but can you? Dice a human, with those strings... cut, chop?"

"Yes. It depends on the material. But I said if you touch it you'll get cut, right? It's the same reasoning. Cutting force is just about applying power to the minimal surface with the fastest speed over the minimum amount of time. This sort of thin string harbors plenty of violence when it comes to dismembering a human body."

"Huhhh. The same reason that paper cuts fingers."

"They're called wire saws when they're used as a weapon. I learned in class. String knife, steel string, hard string, and such. Assassination weapons, I guess. Even newbies can cut off fingers as long as they follow instructions, and expert hands can dice a human with vinyl tape."

"Sounds like a manga that Aikawa-san would like. But would it not be faster to just cut someone with a knife instead of doing something that troublesome? Not that I want to become Tamamo-chan."

"Indeed. But unlike knives, these have other uses. You can attack from all sorts of angles using pulley force. Like spider silk, a spider nest. It's a pretty typical combat style from the older days. They'd call the string being used Twisted Strands, and call the masters Strand Users, and such."

Strand users, eh. You do hear of it a lot.

"Nowadays anything that gets prefixed by true or practical never turns out well. Gosh... people from long ago think of the weirdest things."

Although I guess because they lived in an era where killing was a daily routine, they could not be helped, but there was no need to turn strings into weapons, was there?

"Indeed. Of course, there're only a handful of people that can pull off such street-stunt, science fiction-esque tricks nowadays. You can't learn it in an evening, and it's more like a type of legend. As Master says, it's faster to stab them with a knife."

That was why normally you just use it for safety like we just did, Hime-chan said, and then she flicked her fingers.

"Just a handful – means they do exist?"

"Indeed. This school has one too. Yes – called **Zig Zag**."¹⁾

"Zig Zag..."

"Yes. A third-year named Shisei Yuma. Not that anyone calls Yuma by name. Top of the school, alongside Hagihara-san. Of course, the string used by Zig Zag is nothing like this, and is more serious."

"Strand... but, it is a story that lacks realism. Are we alright? If that person shows up?"

"I think it has more realism than detectives and sealed rooms. At the very least, it exists, historically."

"That is a scary thought..."

"A demerit, you might say?"

She said, and Hime-chan tucked the reels back into her pouchette. "Eek, it's stuck," she started fretting. But unrelated to her fretting, I found a new source of anxiety.

What if that Zig Zag, Shisei Yuma – who was apparently worried over by Hagihara Shiogi and Saijou Tamamo, were to appear as an enemy, would I be able to protect this clumsy girl? That was not just a thought, because for as long as Hime-chan wanted to leave this academy, then Zig Zag would be an obstacle we would not be able to avoid.

I would be forced to decide. What to do. It would be best to return to Aikawa-san's place – mankind's strongest would be able to deal with Zig Zag – but we did not know if that Aikawa-san was still in the dean's room. Then would it be better to try to escape with Hime-chan? While avoiding the Strategist Hagihara Shiogi?

"A tough question..."

But in retrospect, that was irrelevant enough to not be a problem.

Instead, I was worried so much by that trivial issue – that I had missed Hime-chan's expression when she was talking about Shisei Yuma.

As if she was talking about a proud **Master**, yet at the same time as if mixed with a bit of resignation, a paradoxical expression - if I had seen it, then perhaps something would have changed. If I could have imagined Shisei Yuma and Hime-chan's relationship.

But that was something that could not be taken back, –a failure.

"Zig Zag... that is a tough obstacle."

"Yes. To be honest, I think all we can do is run away with Aikawa-san. **Zig Zag** always wears gloves on both hands, so it'll be easy to tell. Strand Users have to wear gloves, or else their own fingers'll get cut off."

"I see. So it is visibly obvious."

Gloves. I just need to pay attention to that.

"Ahh, and when it comes to top, that girl – Saijou Tamamo-chan, was the number one combatant among freshmen at the Hanging High School, and she's feared as **Yamitsuki**."²⁾

"She did not seem like it..."

"You shouldn't decide on appearance. Saijou-chan was different from Hime-chan and was the hope of the academy. Master was just unbelievably lucky back then."

"Lucky..."

It was indeed a hair's difference. If Hime-chan had not arrived, and if, afterwards my reaction had not landed perfectly.

But perhaps, because of that, I had become a target of Tamamo-chan? That was enough to send a chill down my spine. To be honest, that type of person, where you cannot discern what they are thinking, are worse for me than a strategist.

"That Tamamo-chan should not normally appear for an incident like this. But for her to appear, is probably related to Jun-san... and was probably Hagihara-san's strategy, I think."

Battlefield level-up.

"Even without **Zig Zag**, Hime-chan and Master stand no chance against strategies set up for Jun-san. We should meet up with Jun-san as if our livestock depend on it, before she leaves without us."

Animal fanatic?³⁾

"You mean, as if our lives depend on it. But you know, splitting in two is not a bad strategy – you can call Hime-chan being by my side going behind the opponent's back, too."

"But, that's too dangerous."

"Indeed. This is definitely a case of allowing rest poor thinking. Let us rely on the professional..."

And then as we had walked a bit away from the building, perhaps I had gained some composure because there were less places for people to lay waiting in ambush, but I finally realized. Hime-chan had just spoken about it matter-of-factly – and I too had thought about it matter-of-factly, but – if Shiogi-chan were come up with a strategy for Aikawa-san, then did Shiogi-chan know of the dean's death? Shiogi-chan is a strategist, the tactician. She is staff, not the top. She must report to the dean every so often. Even if indirectly, even if through the **faculty room** – Shiogi-chan and other students must have realized the truth.

If they were to not have realized – then someone is hiding it. Then that person might be the **suspect**. Someone painting a self-serving picture – was mixed into this academy. If this were a power struggle, it would be someone from the **faculty room**... or perhaps.

Perhaps, among the students. If there were to be.

Who would be the most suitable for that task?

"... Hime-chan. What sort of girl is Shiogi-chan?"

"Huh? Why're you beating about the bush?"

"... No, I just have a passing interest. You know, know thy enemy, know thy self, and triumph a hundred battles, said Cao Cao I think."

"Sun Tsu."

Hime-chan corrected me.

"Master, you're pretty unlearned."

With a follow-up attack, too.

"What are you saying. You know about Fermi's paradox? I am actually the one that solved it."

"Is- is that so! I apologize for my ignorant insolence! I bow to you!"

"...."

She believed me.

"... Anyways, I want to get some more data on Shiogi-chan. Can you tell me all you know?"

"Umm, you know. Right, you know, she's pretty strict. Acrimonious, maybe? Though you probably have to be, to be a strategist, but I feel like she still warps normalcy. She might be similar to the dean in that regard."

"Nothing is off-limits for achieving results?"

"No, Hagihara-san herself never creates objectives. She selects the most efficient method for achieving what she is told. Hagihara-san has no will of her own."

"... I see. Strategists cannot have their own goals, after all. If shogi pieces had a will of their own, it would be annoying."

"In that sense, Hagihara-san, rather than being suited for being a strategist, you might actually say she can't be anything else."

Hmm. As Aikawa-san said, similar – I guess, similar indeed. When it comes to the person having nothing of their own, myself and Shiogi-chan are the same. However, it seems her choices are even narrower than mine. That was not her fault, but rather because she was locked away in this academy.

The difference between someone belonging to an organization and someone that does not. In that sense – I became even more interested. Including suspicion of killing the dean.

"Ah, but just because she's a strategist doesn't mean you can underestimate her. Hagihara-san is a student of this academy, and we all are trained in self-defense."

"Yeah, my body knows that already."

"I guess the biggest thing about Hagihara-san would be kendo. She's a kendo **ni-dan**."

"Ni-dan? That is pretty ordinary for this school."

"No no, when it comes to kendo you can't underestimate ni-dan. They have always called it Kendo Saint Vulcan."

They do not.

Hagihara Shiogi – Saijou Tamamo, and Shisei Yuma. This place was filled with exhibits ranging from the far-right culture to the far-left martial arts. –The road ahead seemed quite rocky. If there was any place for optimism, it would be that Yamitsuki and Zig Zag and other such direct combat students probably lacked tactical minds.

"But you know, Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan and such – if I were to have met them outside of this school, they would be fun girls to be with."

Especially Shiogi-chan, I was fond of her.

"Master is soft toward enemies. They call that sending salt to the enemy."

"That would be finishing them off," I shook my head. "But you know, when it comes down to it, Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan and Yuma-chan, they are all people."

"The are all different people."

Hime-chan said, a rare occasion in which she said something pessimistic. Of course, her expression was that melancholic one.

Once again, I looked at Hime-chan. Originally, this had just been because Hime-chan wanted to quit this school, wanted to run away – but did it make sense to blockade escape just to **protect secrets**?

Hime-chan called herself a failure, and I believed that, and Aikawa-san did not refute that – but was it truly possible that Yukariki Ichihime, as a friend of mankind's strongest, was actually a **nobody failure**?

It was just a wild guess, but there may be another reason for why they obstructed Hime-chan's escape to this degree. For example, if Hime-chan had some special skill, some strange power, for instance... In other words, the dean did not want to part with Hime-chan, for instance...

That could be like **Yamitsuki** like Saijou Tamamo, or like **Zig Zag** like Shisei Yuma. But to this point it seemed like Hime-chan did not have any direct combat skill – if so, she would not have been captured so easily by the **Strategist**'s fence. But if you were to suggest she is a strategist or tactician like Hagihara Shiogi, I would say no. I would refute that clearly, as Hime-chan's actions, such as chasing me, lacked any sort of sense of reason.

Something felt off. It was like trying a seven-colored Rubik's Cube. Like a puzzle that had too many pieces and could not be completed. Too much evidence, too many hints.

What meaning did Hime-chan hold to this unrealistic academy – if that were not a skill thing or a knowledge thing, perhaps a mental emotional skill? Something that could rival the **Strategist** or **Yamitsuki**, and even **Zig Zag**.

“... Hmm.”

Then, from hereon forth, if we were to fail meeting up with Aikawa-san, and were to be obstructed by Hagihara Shiogi and Shisei Yuma, Saijou Tamamo and other such dangers, then maybe Yukariki Ichihime's hidden, secret power would awaken and save us from the pinch situation.

“Actually, Hime-chan was an ESPer!”

“W- what-! This is really a surprise! I was perfectly saved by this!”

“But I can't control this power... ahh, Master!”

"What is this! My right hand is Hannibal! A green aura is smoking from my shoelaces!"

.....

It appears I have no novelist talent.

An emo that lacks even imagination, is there a point to living?

Leaving that aside, in any case, probably, Aikawa-san was hiding something from me. And most likely, Hime-chan too. That is fine, obviously. I am hiding plenty of things as well as I live, and regardless of who, I will probably never speak them. Secrets are secrets because they are locked away. And could it be wished, that secrets remain secrets, that lies remain lies, and all will end as such – I hope.

If I could, I wanted to end as an outsider. I had no intention of abandoning that wish.

As we were about to pass through a place that looked like a courtyard, smack, I tripped over something. After Hime-chan's story earlier, I had a cold sweat thinking it might be a trap, but nothing happened. It appeared that I had tripped over a ball that people had forgotten to store away.

"Jeez—"

But, just as I was about to pick up that ball, my thoughts caught up to my action. Sumiyuri Academy – Hanging High School. In this abnormal academy, would something ordinary as **a ball that people had forgotten to store away** actually exist—

I looked at the ball. It was Saijou Tamamo's head.

In the middle of darkness, a rough-cut head in decapitated form.

No matter how insanely insane my mind may be, I could not remain calm this time. I respectively yanked my hand away from grabbing **that**, and then my mind stopped. I was completely confused. Completely deranged. The happening, the situation, I could not comprehend. I was misunderstanding everything. I could not figure out the correct answer. **That** which reminded me no matter what of Origami Noa's head hanging from the dean's room's ceiling lacked any expression and looked like she was just asleep, yet there was nothing below her neck–

"Careful!"

Hime-chan saved me. She tackled me with abandon at the waist to fling me away, and while normally being struck like that by Hime-chan who was maybe half my size would not even cause me to budge, my soul-less body was easily pushed aside, similar to what happened some hours ago.

And then that moment. Where I was standing was a bowgun arrow stuck into the ground.

My body went below freezing and I immediately grasped what was happening. Keeping crouched, I hugged Hime-chan to me, and then rolled. I could hear arrows going thud, thud into the ground behind us. If I kept rolling like this they would be able to right their aim – I needed to go on the offensive.

The first arrow was fired from – around there? Given the direction of the later arrows, I could make an estimate. Even if the enemy was moving while firing, then I can read that, too. While rolling, I grabbed a rock the size of a fist, and

then changed direction. Seeing an arrow land a bit off, I stood, and threw the rock where I predicted they would be. At the same time, the bowgun attacks ceased.

Eventually – in the darkness, the figure of one girl faded in. A slender form with a mesmerizing set of long, black hair – and the black sailor uniform.

“These things are truly no good unless you are used to it–” she said, as she tossed the bowgun aside. It appeared she had run out of arrows anyways.

“Hagihara Shiogi. Once again, I am pleased to meet you.”

“– me, too.”

I stood in front of Hime-chan, as if to shield her. We had been ambushed yet again. It seemed Tamamo-chan had communicated our location after all. She looked dull, but she was properly acting in a group, Tamamo-chan.

But then why was a piece of Tamamo-chan on the ground there?

“I wanted to take advantage of your surprise. But it did not go as well as planned – it is rare that my plans go wrong to this extent. Really, just what are you?”

The last question was directed toward me – but that was my line. What is with this school. Just three hours ago I had seen a dangling head of a dismembered dean, and then three hours after that I tripped over the head of a girl, and in between, I had almost lost my life a number of times.

Battlefield.

The word that had come up several times the first time I had encountered Shiogi-chan crossed my mind. Tamamo-chan was a comrade that had just been slain. Hence Tamamo-chan and I had nothing like friendship or love or sympathy – but this easily, I saw her head like **we're out of time so this is the end**–

“... Is there a meaning to this?”

"It is meaningless to think of a meaning. I am always just choosing the most efficient, most effective plan. Of course—" Shiogi-chan shook her head with concern, without any trace of acting. Currently, her head was still attached. "— More than half of the students lost their will to fight due to the appearance of Overkilled Red – so this was not the most efficient, most effective. But still I was able to come up with the next most efficient fairly effective plan, so it was alright."

She said it in past tense.

Indeed, checkmate had already ended. Checkmate based on impeccable timing and action. Not a single bowgun arrow landed, but Shiogi-chan was able to learn that Aikawa Jun was not hidden nearby. She probably only half-intended to land a shot to begin with – and if all that was here was Hime-chan and I, then a bare-handed Shiogi-chan would suffice.

"This is the end of the game of tag – from now on, this is just a game of ogre."

Check...

There was no helping it... to this point, this was definitely our defeat. We were unable to escape from Hagihara Shiogi's iron fence.

In the game of going behind each other's backs – but it was a satisfying defeat.

This was not bad.

Protecting Hime-chan was too much for me, after all. That was Aikawa-san's role, after all. It is a shame, Mr. User of Nonsense.

"... well, then."

Then, it is time to beg for mercy.

I was well-learned – in begging for mercy.

I took a step forward, and Shiogi-chan also took a step forward, –and in between, Hime-chan slid in.

Spread her hands out, she created a small wall in front of me. That was, truly, a small and fragile wall – but that meaning was understood.

“Uu, uuuuu–”

Hime-chan trembled, but she did not move. Covering me, she refused to move.

“....”

Shiogi-chan saw that and stopped. And then she sighed, exasperated, and then said, “Stop your futile resistance, Yukariki.”

“I do not remember teaching you to struggle until the end. Now, here – you do not have the reason to defeat me, you understand that in your head, correct?”

– That's,” Hime-chan trembled, but with a firm voice, she answered Shiogi-chan. “Not certain until you try.”

“To not know until you try – are you that foolish?”

“Indeed. And I'm, fine with that,” Hime-chan said. “I would rather be dumb like this, than smart like that.”

– Ah.

Why did I.

Why did I think of such a stupid thing.

Aikawa Jun's friend – Yukariki Ichihime.

For that, special skills or strange powers.

Would such a requirement be needed?

She thought of me and cried.

She frantically stopped me.

She chased after me.

She saved me.

She – smiled for me.

She is no failure.

Hime-chan.

You are – a brilliant person.

Someone worthy of standing alongside mankind's strongest.

"... Gosh – this is quite a masterpiece."

Then, fine.

I will continue our play friendship for just a little longer.

Good, good. I feel very good.

Right now, I – feel, really good.

If I slip up, I may even start laughing.

"Hime-chan... you can go back alone, right?" I whispered. "You followed my trail in the first place, so you should be able to return alone, right?"

"... Master? What're you talking about?"

She seemed truly puzzled.

No matter what, they overlapped.

"Leave this to me and go on ahead – is what I'm saying."

Now is the time to split. This is not my selfishness or my cowardice – this is my strategy. Alright, Shiogi-chan. If the strategist you are going to treat Tamamo-chan like **that** – then I'll throw away my role as the user of nonsense.

From now on, it's not about going behind each other's backs.

It's a fight to the death.

I'll kill you, slice you to bits, line you all up, trim you down to size, and set you out for all the world to see.

"But, Master..."

"And, it's a bit late, but a correction. I might not be able to be Aikawa-san's friend. But I do wish to be one. Just now, I thought so. So your nickname for me is terribly accurate... while I'm half-assed and vague, it's definitely and truly absolutely, ironically suiting. Then—" I glanced at Hime-chan for just a moment. I couldn't discern her expression. "– If the apprentice doesn't listen to the Master, it's weird, right?"

Hime-chan.

Yukariki Ichihime nodded – and then ran off, her mind set.

"! Wait!"

Shiogi-chan's expression turned to surprise, and at that moment, I ran toward her. First strike certain victory – of course I wasn't choosing such a pretty strategy. This was just a simple act to buy time for Hime-chan to escape. Even if Hagihara Shiogi is a **Strategist** – she must react to the threat in front of her. That's a reflexive action that can't be helped for as long as a human is a living being. To avoid that, you need become like a human failure, to have athletic prowess

surpassing reflexes – but unfortunately Shiogi-chan had a normal human girl's physique.

"–!"

Shiogi-chan barely avoided by attack, and then took three steps back, creating space between us. In kendo this would be called the space of nine steps. It was sufficient for enemies, and barely not enough for combat.

Shiogi-chan wistfully looked at Hime-chan, who was fading out, and then sighed heavily.

"I do not understand... why do you keep trying to throw off my calculations? I cannot read you at all. They say people are made of atoms, but you seem to have no motive whatsoever, instead just enjoying being a thorn in my side."

Motive? Ah... Tamamo-chan asked me that, too. Although I can answer that clearly, now.

"My motive was to get Hime-chan away from here. If you want a joking tone, a bit of a quick graduation."

"That attitude suits you more, you know. More than half-heartedly lining up nonsense."

Shiogi-chan too, had just allowed her **motivate** of Hime-chan to escape, yet she was undeterred. Even though her own plan had just been twisted out of shape. It appeared her mode was different from the Shiogi-chan of five hours ago.

"... I suppose as would be expected of Overkilled Red's partner."

"Partner? Hey, hey. I'm just a decoy that got dragged into this mess. Does that person have a partner... partners must be equals, you know, and an equal of mankind's strongest, that's illogical."

"The partner of the strongest is the weakest. And decoy? Were you forced into promising that you will return your nonsense? Your talent at effortlessly entering this Hanging High School and meeting up with Yukariki Ichihime – this Hanging High School that boasts security befitting a golden castle, to manage to create enough confusion to let that red color to slip in unnoticed, to call that a decoy, no one will fall for it."

"....."

Aikawa-san – was that her motive for using me? To begin with, she intended to slip in herself, so she tossed me in as the point-man. Actually, that made everything make sense. But, that was all.

"You're over-valuing me. I told you, didn't I? That's just luck and coincidence."

"If that were the case, it would be so much easier for me... you may not realize it yourself, so then, shall I tell you, as a souvenir for the underworld?"

"Souvenir for the underworld? Awesome, that's a wonderful phrase. I love the underworld."⁴⁾

"... **That talent** of yours is extremely dangerous. You are not doing anything, yet everything around you goes insane... **If Nothing Is Bad**, shall we call it. Has it never occurred to you? Abnormal incidents always occur around you, and strange people always are drawn to you, are they not?"

"... Nowhere in my soul."

Though to be honest I can't think of anything opposite. Or rather, did I have anything as wonderful as a soul?

"To use more popular words, you are like a type-that-magnetizes-talented-quirks along with being a type-that-causes-accidents. An even simpler way of

putting it would be a simple troublemaker. ... in this case, your lack of motive or will is extremely irritating."

To a strategist like herself, she said.

"That is why **we** are labeling nasty existences like you **Aimless Equation**."⁵⁾

A system that exists for the purpose of being aimless and for the purpose of being nonexistent – more than zero or Hitoshiki, an absolute equation that causes problems just by existing.

"... Of course. You and I are similar, but you've been given a motive, and I reject the motives that are given to me, so we're completely different. If you're a strategist, then I'm – I guess you could say a scammer."

"... Is that so," Shiogi-chan closed her eyes and nodded. "... Then, I shall kill you back."

Shiogi-chan slide her feet one, two steps toward me, signaling that the discussion had ended. I stood awaiting, not bothering to set up a form. Shiogi-chan seemed to think this was suspicious, but she kept her feet moving, and closed the distance to where in kendo they would call it one-foot one-blade, and then–

"Wait."

I called time-out.

Shiogi-chan's shoulders slumped.

"Y, you know–"

"Don't misunderstand. I have no intention of being your enemy."

"...? What do you, mean?" she seemed to want to tear her hair out, as she took her distance from me again. "What other than being an enemy do you intend to do in this situation?"

"Betray."

I said, boldly. I overlapped myself with myself when I was declaring that I was escaping to Aikawa-san, and eliminated any fear or fright.

"Be... a tray?"⁽⁶⁾

"Yup. if you think about it, there is no way I can win against a kendo ni-dan like you. And it does not look like I will be able to escape... then the remaining option is to **betray**, right?"

Scammers and silver tongues.

"**betray**... what do you mean exactly?"

"Where Hime-chan just ran to, and where Aikawa Jun is waiting, I will tell you."

"... Background, in other words. But I do not need to accept such a negotiation," Shiogi-chan said, glaring at me with an evaluating look. "I can just break one, two bones and force you to talk."

"But that is no good. That is not good not good at all, Shiogi-chan. If you were to do that, then I will declare right now that I will lie. And I will tell you now that my lying is pretty good."

"I have confidence that I will force you to say the truth."

"Yet some level of anxiety will remain. According to you, I am an equal of Aikawa Jun, right? And Shiogi-chan. In this case, for me to **betray** here holds graet meaning for you. You understand, as a strategist. You said it yourself... **Overkilled**

Red is soft on friends. It is true, Aikawa-san did not pursue you that time. So soft on friends can also mean weak to friends – am I wrong?”

“Let us say, that I were to hurt you,” Shiogi-chan said, as if confirming. “Aikawa Jun would unleash her fury on us, but if you betray instead–”

Trust is sad. That is why betrayal hurts.

“– There would be an opening for a strategist, correct?”

“... So. This exchange, what will you gain other than not being hurt here?”

“To be honest, I do not care. No, really, until just now I was seriously intending to let Hime-chan escape and take you on– and then go down fighting, but I do not hate you that much. Inhumanity that does not think of humans as human – I actually like that.”

“.....!”

Shiogi-chan seemed to be surprised by my line, as she took a step back. I had thought she would begin an argument with me over that, so this was unexpected, but in any case I could not let go even an unexpected chance caused by an opponent's slip-up, so I continued.

“I may be meaningless and aimless, but you too are not doing things for yourself. You too do not select motives for yourself. We have differences but we are the same. We are similar. Shiogi-chan, you know. I love proud, want-less, lonesome people – and I do not want to become an enemy of people I am fond of... I want to be as friendly as possible.”

“In other words.”

Shiogi-chan seemed taken aback and took a deep breath before responding,

“You are saying that you have personal love for this Hagihara Shiogi?”

She said.

"....."

Something was wrong... or rather, everything was wrong... but whatever. Maybe that was Shiogi-chan's style as a strategist. Then all that is left for me is to follow through on my style. No, not just follow through. To penetrate.

"You can interpret that as you wish. Ah, of course, this **betrayal**... no, in your words, this **exchange**. Not that it really matters, but this is a match between a strategist and a scammer. It is not that we are creating a written contract, we are simply continuing our match. And possible, you may be being scammed by me. If you do not have the confidence to defeat me with a **strategy** – then you do not need to accept. Break my arm or leg or whatever. I will not resist."

"....."

Shiogi-chan looked like she was struggling with this for a bit – although unlike her usual self her acting was quite obvious – and after another moment, she looked at me with suspicion and,

"Then – if you can deceive me, go ahead and deceive me, Mr. Scammer."

She stretched her left hand out to me.

"That need not be said. I am good at deceiving and being deceived. Especially when it comes to girls I like."

In response, I reached out with my right hand.

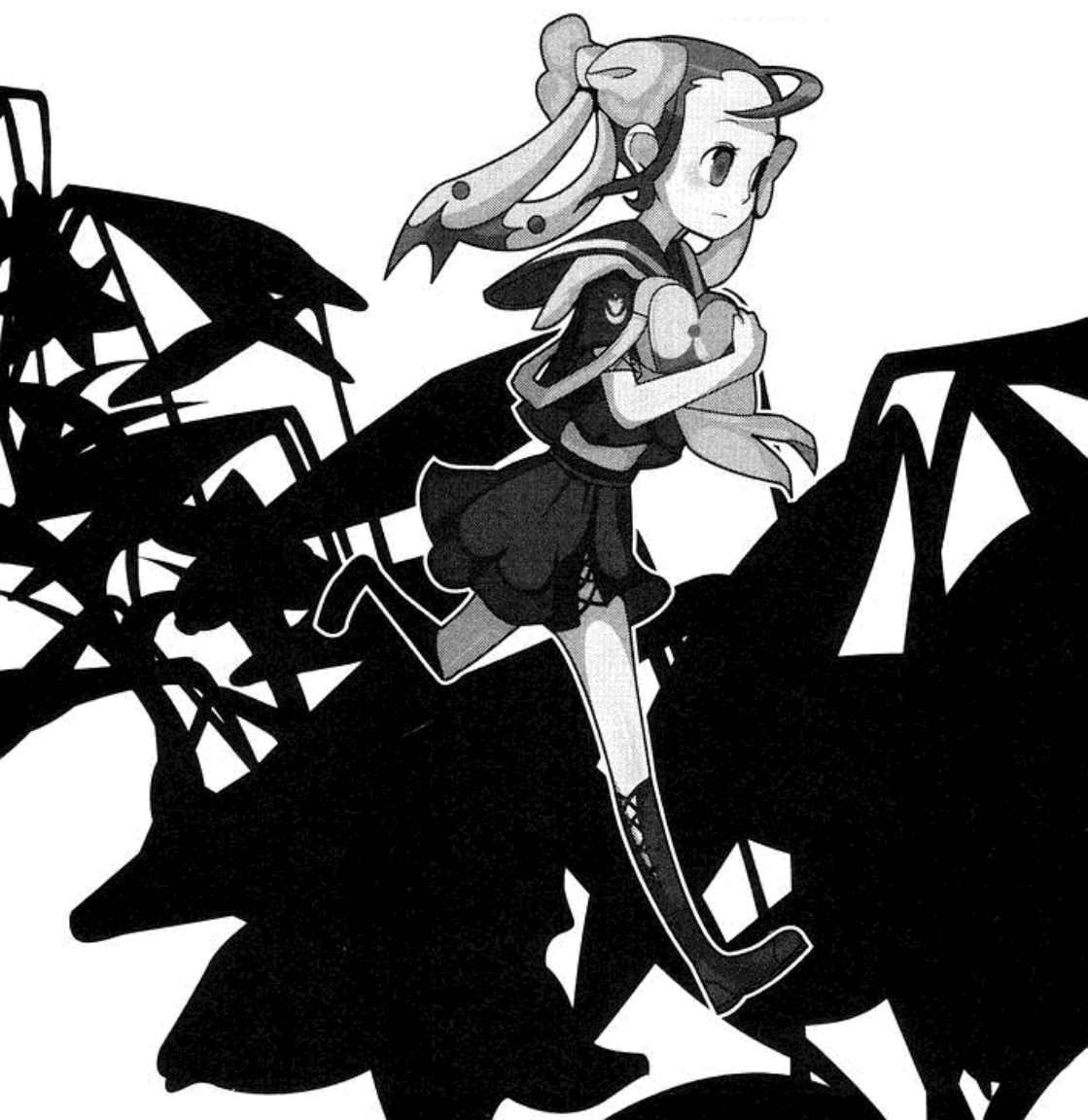
"....." "..... Hahah."

Hagihara Shiogi laughed, like a high school girl.

- 1) Written 病蜘蛛 (Sick Spider)
- 2) Written 闇突 or “dark stab,” implying that she stabs in the darkness. It’s a pun though, in that normally if you say “yamitsuki” you think of 病み付き, which means “with illness.” Draw conclusion as you will.
- 3) She meant lives
- 4) Pun! Underworld in Japanese is 冥土 (Meido). There’s another type of “meido” that Ii-tan loves.
- 5) Worth noting here that it’s written 無為式 (Mutameshiki) and ends with “Shiki.” Wonder where that’s come up before...
- 6) Pun! In Japanese betray is 裏切り which can be read as “back cut” (pretty direct...), but since that doesn’t work in English...



**Yukariki Ichihime,
the client.**



The Sixth Act

Extremity Death

A liar is the end of a human.

1

Now then, the course of events had caused me to betray Hime-chan, but – now then now then, what to do. Well, of course, that strategy called for me to get through that instance using violence, but **now** – a now in which I was walking around a completely unfamiliar school building in the name of guiding Shiogi-chan to Aikawa-san's place – was a very half-assed situation.

In other words, right now, I could go either way. I could lead Shiogi-chan to a completely irrelevant place, and I could also head toward the dean's room with Aikawa-san, where Hime-chan had headed. If I wanted to betray I could betray, and if I wanted to penetrate I could penetrate. This was a beautifully set up case of two options on the extremes.

That said–

“No matter what I choose, the conclusion is the same.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, not really.”

“More importantly, are they really in this building? Yukariki ran in a completely different direction, I think.”

“That was a fake. Hime-chan probably thought I would get beat up quickly.”

“Hmm... is that so.”

Despite the future being set, the reason I was wavering in my decision – would be this Shiogi-chan. I was able to settle her down somewhat, but she had been acting somewhat distant for a while. Of course, we are strangers, so acting distant is quite ordinary, but something about it was unnatural.

And there was the matter of Tamamo-chan. Tamamo-chan, who was brutally killed and then used as a tool. I was now walking beside that person who used her as a tool. I do not think I would have ever been able to like Tamamo-chan, but still.

And then the matter of the dean – was it right to say that Shiogi-chan was behind it? At the very least, I currently suspected her. Like Tamamo-chan – no, Origami Noa had been even more brutally dismembered, and then had her head hung. If that was a rebellion by the strategist, then was this Hagihara Shiogi, walking next to me, simply playing me the fool? Or perhaps as a strategist she knew everything and remained silent nonetheless.

I had nothing to back up either thought.

Phew. Thinking began to exhaust me. It was a pain, and I wondered about just continuing to betray. At this rate, I felt like I could become good friends with Shiogi-chan, and taking on Aikawa-san sounded like fun. And Aikawa-san was basically the same whether she was an enemy or friend, anyways. Shiogi-chan's hair is so beautiful, too. I wonder if she would be angry if I touched it.

"What are you staring at me for? How impolite."

Shiogi-chan stopped walking, and turned to me with a suspecting look. She seemed to have sensed my killing (?) intent. Nevertheless, human relations valued first impressions heavily.

"No, not really. It is nothing."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. But Shiogi-chan."

Your hair is beautiful, I was about to say, but I caught myself at the last moment. This was Shiogi-chan, she must have heard such praise many times in her life. In that case, the probability of her just ignoring me was high, and there was the danger of her looking at me like a below-average, pathetic boy. In that case, I would require an opinion from a different perspective.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Shiogi-chan, you have big breasts."

Shiogi-chan tripped.

... It was the first time I had seen a human trip on flat ground.

Shiogi-chan stood up with her face completely red to her ears, and she glared forcefully, but her mouth simply opened and closed over and over again and she ended up not saying anything, instead whirling her pretty hair around and strutting straight down the hallway. Hmm, it appears I had failed (I was meaning to, anyways).

Oh well. Human relations are all about giving up.

"Ah, yes," after some walking, Shiogi-chan said, as if she had just remembered. "I had not asked for your name, yet. Not having something to call you with is inconvenient, so if you would please tell me."

"Ahh. I have given my real name—"

Then.

As I was about to answer absent-mindedly, I looked out the window toward the campus grounds. We were currently on the second floor so we were not that high – not that high, and that was the reason. Not that high, and that was reason that I saw Yukariki Ichihime meandering about in the bushes between the two buildings.

"....."

Why was she there? Enough time had passed for her to have reached the faculty building... I could not think of the reason for her to be wandering about in such an odd place. Hime-chan soon disappeared amid the trees – but I was not seeing things.

"... Is there something wrong?"

"No, umm... umm."

Could it be that she was worried about me again, and that was why? She had become worried, but when she returned I was no longer in the courtyard, so she was looking for Shiogi-chan and I?

What a – what a bothersome fool. This was beyond just being a busybody. Even if I have a latent ability to gather the strange, the weird, and the insane to me, I am not valuable enough to fret over to this extent. I even said to leave it to me. How much does she need to be like **that**? Shit... I had finally become irritated.

"Um, I want to know your name."

"..... Yeah. Name... name, name..."

Shiogi-chan had not noticed Hime-chan yet. If she did, she would certainly jump out this window. But I would need Shiogi-chan to deal with Aikawa Jun. Hime-chan, too, had not noticed us. If she had, she would not be wandering around there.

Then..... then I shall continue to be a scammer.

"Then let me make this a quiz." I turned my body to avoid letting her see outside.

"I will give you a hint, so Shiogi-chan can try to guess my name."

"Oh. That's a good idea. I love that stuff."

I hate them, but of course I do not say that.

"How many hints?"

"Three. Three times, you can ask me questions. As long as it is not directly asking for my name or anything like that, you can ask anything."

"Mmhm. Alright, I shall accept that challenge."

And then Shiogi-chan thought for a moment.

She forgot about Hime-chan and thought.

"Then, question one. Tell me all of your nicknames."

"Nicknames?"

"Yukariki calls you **Master**, Overkilled Red calls you **Ii-tan**, right? Those."

"Ahh. The aliases I am called currently are **Master** and **Ii-tan**, and otherwise **Ikkun The letter I Ii-nii Inosuke, User of Nonsense** and **Scammer**, I think."

"Most of that isn't very appealing... is "I" the keyword?"

"Is that question?"

"No, just a confirmation. In that case, why does Yukariki call you **Master**?"

"Who knows... I would like to know that myself. Maybe because she is the apprentice of the user of nonsense?"

"Huh... well then, next question. If you romanize your name, how many vowels and consonants do you have?"

Woah. This was just play to keep Shiogi-chan's attention, but I had to stop and admire her. As you would expect of a **Strategist** - she asked good questions. That she did not ask for the number of letters was cunning.

"Eight vowels, seven consonants."

"Hmm, I see. Then the last question. If you are to use **1** for **あ**, **2** for **い**, **3** for **う**... and then **46** for **ん**, what would be the sum for your name?"

I felt like she just checkmated me. She thinks fast.

"134."

"What a strange name."

Shiogi-chan laughed in amusement.

"Who knows. Perhaps it could be a fake name. I actually am proud of the fact that I have only told my real name once."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. And, although you are probably thinking correctly, you should not call me by that name. There are three who have called me by my real name to date, and not one is still living."

"..... Just three?"

"One was Ii Harukana. That would be my little sister. She died when two airplanes ran into each other. One was Kunagisa Tomo. She was my friend. She is

living but not living, dead but not dead. One was Omokage Magokoro. That was... well, what shall we say. After having her body fiddled with in human experiments, she burned to death in crimson fire."

"Because they called you by your name?"

"I think so."

"... Then what shall I call you?"

"Whatever you please..."

I said, and I glanced out the window. Alright, Hime-chan was gone. It did not seem like she was hiding anywhere, either. It seemed we had successfully avoided her sight.

... What was I doing? I was still in limbo, not having decided whether to keep betraying or not, yet I **spontaneously** decided to let Hime-chan go, so what was I doing? Very strange. I even spoke unnecessarily.

I even had to remember three bad things. I had forgotten about them, too.

..... No.

I had never forgotten.

I did not need to remember, because, I always thought of them.

"Ah, speaking of which, excuse me for a moment."

Shiogi-chan took that thing that looked like a cell phone from her pocket, the same type that Tamamo-chan had carried.

"Yes – yes. I am currently executing my next strategy – I gained an **accomplice**. Yes, leave it to me – I am currently at –"

Checking in. The exchange of information is important to both parties, so this was necessary. If soldiers went left and right and did whatever they wanted on the battlefield, there would be no war. However, with the dean now dead, who was on the receiving end of the communication? Someone from the faculty, or perhaps that **Zig Zag**—

"Then excuse me, dean."

Said Shiogi-chan as she cut her phone.

I, of course, hid my surprise from my face. However, inside I felt like a whirlwind of confusion. Why do things keep giving me new things to ponder? What'd she just say? Who was she just calling?

For instance, there is someone else who goes by "dean" – no, the possibility exists that Shiogi-chan was acting just now – but what necessity for acting is there?

Then Shiogi-chan is not the suspect – if she does not know of the dean's death. Come to think of it, my suspicion of her had neither reason nor evidence. I had simply thought so because the dean had been dismembered like Tamamo-chan. But, if I think about it some more—

"Shiogi-chan. This time I will ask the question... did you kill Saijou Tamamo?"

"Huh?" said Shiogi-chan with an utterly shocked look. "Why would I, this Hagihara Shiogi, need to kill an ally?"

"... Well, because. You put just her head out in the courtyard..."

"Oh please, don't say such weird things. I do not have the **technique** to do such a thing. Only **Zig Zag** could do that."

Ahh, come to think of it, the dean's neck and Tamamo-chan's neck had been cut differently. The dean had been abrasively cut – but Tamamo-chan's neck had a very clean, smooth cut. Hime-chan had said – the stringmaster **Zig Zag**. The eccentric that could use rope that was only meaningful to us as a rappelling tool for killing–

"Killing allies is nonsense. I simply used a head that was rolling about when I had run over for my next strategy."

"....."

I thought that was odd, too. But perhaps there was no helping it given that she is a **Strategist**. It seemed Shiogi-chan was missing some human-like attributes. You could even say that it is the fault of the Hanging High School, but I felt like there was also something fundamentally off about her, too.

However, it is because of this Shiogi-chan the strategist – that indeed, to meaninglessly kill an ally – to reduce the number of **pieces** is unthinkable. Just the way there is no professional who refuses to use knights just because they are useless.

In other words, **Zig Zag** is the extreme opposite of the strategist, more like Tamamo-chan than Shiogi-chan – a berserker.

Then what happens? The problem about the sealed room. The problem about the dismembered body. Given the cuts, the dean's murder was not the doing of **Zig Zag**. There is a different suspect. Shiogi-chan – the reason to suspect her, the killing of Tamamo-chan was not her, so she is improbable. And there is no reason to suspect Tamamo-chan given that she is already dead.

The suspect must be a **faculty**, after all? Speaking of which, it is rather suspicious that not a single one has appeared so far. If one of them had eliminated the

dean and was controlling Shiogi-chan – if the strategist Shiogi-chan was being controlled like a puppet whose neck was hanging from a string.

The school was in the midst of a power struggle.

Is – anticlimactic. Not a hope of pieces. For something like that, Shiogi-chan and I, and Hime-chan and Tamamo-chan, and Aikawa Jun had been dragged into this mess - and then. And then they would get away with it, was that what they thought?

Their false hopes – needed to be corrected.

"Is something wrong? You've suddenly gone quiet."

"No, not really. Suddenly going quiet is a hobby of mine. By the way, Shiogi-chan. Let us continue the quiz. Shiogi-chan, do you read mystery novels?"

"For what purpose?"

Shiogi-chan tilted her head to the side.

"Uh, ... like, killing time. Or for studying, or something..."

"To study from books... **"Inspiration is greater when drawn from a living person than writing,"** said Tayama Katai."

"The subtitle being **Throw away writing** was quite cool, but you read Tayama Katai?"

"Yes, as is normal for a high school student, no?"

She said it as if it were normal.

"... Then, a quiz. For instance..."

I hid the fact that it was the truth from Shiogi-chan (of course, I would not tell her that Hime-chan was the person I spoke of), I told her about the dean's dismemberment sealed room mystery. The steel door that could not be opened, the corpse inside, dismemberment, the neck hanging from the ceiling. The double-locked windows, the top-most floor. The one-way ventilation.

"... How simple," Shiogi-chan said. "What about that is a quiz?"

"Is it simple?"

Of course, this question was to hear Shiogi-chan's opinion, but it was also to try to see some sort of reaction **if Shiogi-chan were indeed the suspect**. However, there was no visible sense of anxiety in Shiogi-chan. She just looked disappointed, **having expected a difficult question**.

"Then, the answer?"

"The door was simply not locked to begin with," Shiogi-chan matter-of-factly said. "What you just told me, you simply thought it was locked to begin with, but no one ever tried, right? Then, you simply thought of a sealed room as a sealed room."

Someone once said, **When I determine whether this is a sealed room or not, there are two possibilities. That it is a sealed room, or that it is not**. I see, just because it looked like a sealed room did not necessitate that it actually was. That was a common deception.

If you try to hide a lie with a lie, the lie ends up becoming apparent. Then if you make a big lie from the start, then you no longer need to falsify afterwards – or something? If the door was **just closed** from the start, and had not been locked, then **anyone** could kill the dean. Then it being a sealed room was simply our mistake, and–

"No, that is wrong."

If the first person to the scene had been Hime-chan or I, then Shiogi-chan's answer could be correct. But there was another, Aikawa Jun. It was impossible for Aikawa Jun be there and make such a rookie mistake.

"Is that so? Then – yes. The crime may not have taken place there. Dismembered, and then from a nook somewhere – for example the ventilation shaft, it could be thrown in from the adjacent room. The ventilation shaft means that you do not need to enter the room, and you can easily tie the hair to the fan."

"But the fan only opens from inside."

"That is why that is an example. Even if it is different, a dismembered body can find plenty of nooks and crannies to find its way inside, right? Like a dust chute, or the water works."

"Hmmm..."

"Or perhaps just a copy key."

That, too, had no dreams or hopes, nor even any courage to solve the problem. Although you could say that seeking such things in a story about a person's death is the oddity.

In the end, I felt I was at a dead end. I even wanted to borrow the paw of a cat. How would Hime-chan mistake that saying?

... Hm?

Just now. I felt like I was about to think of something.

"Oh well, forget that quiz then. I apologize for asking something so boring. Regardless, this school is quite odd..."

"Really? I quite like it."

"... Have you never thought that you may have lived a normal life?"

"What other life could have satisfied my skills as a **strategist**?" Shiogi-chan laughed. "Just as your **Aimless Equation** has no role anywhere – oh, speaking of which. You went to a normal high school?"

"No, I even dropped out of obligatory education. And then..." she would know about ER3, but I decided it would be better to not bring it up. "... well, I took an exam, and now I'm a student at a university."

"Is that the truth?"

"I am not lying. I simply did not say the truth."

"If you are trying to fool the other, then are they not the same?"

Time and place and thing and following, a conversation between a strategist and a scammer that had nothing to do with any of those. Lying, fooling, deceiving, defrauding, exaggerating, covering, and hiding. Is there allowed to be a conversation so disjointed?

"Shiogi-chan, do you have a dream for your future?"

"The future simply has reality. Indeed, if I can manage to **graduate**, I will probably work for Rule."

"Rule... hearing that makes me feel exhausted. And then in the end you become Zhuge Liang or Hannibal? I feel like a girl's happiness can be found elsewhere."

"Oh. What an archaic opinion. Are you telling me to become a housewife?"

"I am not saying something like that. I am simply saying that going **to a place like that** is obviously a path to misfortune. But as you wish... being blessed is in the eye of the beholder – more importantly."

A pointless buying of time, as we climbed the stairs to the next floor, and then walked down the hall of that floor, I asked Shiogi-chan. But this time, it was something I really wanted to know.

"If I were to keep bringing you to Aikawa-san, what do you intend to do? I do not think that a strategist like yourself intends to challenge mankind's strongest without any plan, but I also cannot imagine any strategy for dealing with the one-man astro army."

Any physical means would not work against Aikawa-san. And underhandedness and trickery would never reach her either. To hurt Aikawa-san, even this scammer could not think of a means. As Shiogi-chan said, perhaps if she found out that I was a **traitor**, she may be shocked just a little, but that would soon be transferred to a forward-thinking energy. That was how enormous Aikawa-san was.

"A strategy – I have a tactic, at least."

Shiogi-chan said with confidence.

"Overkilled Red may be **mankind's strongest contractor** but she is not **a contractor that is mankind's strongest** – that would be my target."

"... Mmhmm."

"Even if my opponent is mankind's strongest, my name is Hagihara Shiogi. Even devils all flee before me. I shall put on full display, fair and square, without minding the means, unexpected strikes from straight ahead."

Did that mean that she intended to go behind Aikawa-san's back? I felt like she has no rear side, no weakness, no hypocrisy, so that would be very difficult–

But then I realized. Indeed. That sealed room. My thoughts returned to that. Indeed, no matter how meticulous a suspect had created that sealed room, they were going against Aikawa Jun. Aikawa Jun has no weakness nor hypocrisy – no impossibility or strangeness. She was simply illogical. Solving sealed room mysteries a generation old before they are created was Aikawa Jun. Whether that sealed room was **the door just being open** or something else did not matter. It would never work on Aikawa-san.

Yet Aikawa-san had not figured it out yet.

“Why...?”

Why could that be. That was most illogical. For mankind's strongest to not be able to figure that out is the most unfair of rule-breaking. A detective that did not solve a mystery, a serial killer that does not kill people, a user of nonsense that works for others, it was filled with paradox.

Then – no, **because**. That dismembered body held a simple meaning in its shape? Origami Noa's body was minced with a chainsaw – or rather, **zig zag'd**.

Reconstructing... close... similar... and then compilation.

And then simultaneously, I thought of something more important. The falseness that would blow away the sealed room. I arrived at a fundamental place when I reversed from the truth.

The content of Shiogi-chan's response when I asked about Tamamo-chan's death.

'Oh please, don't say such weird things. I do not have the **technique** to do such a thing. Only 'Zig Zag' could do that.' – 'Oh please, don't say such weird things.'

As if I had mistaken something that I should obviously know. Come to think of it, Tamamo-chan had also said such a thing. That feeling of misplacement, the **meaning that is born** from the misunderstanding – that if the third-year student Shisei Yuma did not **exist**–

Already.

If I already know Zig Zag – but not a reason that I did not notice, but rather a reason that I could not notice, then – a lie.

That I was deceived.

“– No way.”

That voice was not mine, but that of Shiogi-chan. She had stopped walking behind me, and – her face was ashen. Her eyes were faded. She had an expression of shock – of despair. I could not understand why she made such an expression, and my thoughts temporarily ceased.

“... What is it, Shiogi-chan?”

“That quiz – the dean?”

“–!”

Extreme regret. Shoot – she figured it out.

Indeed, the **truth** that someone of my level could arrive at, there was no reason that the strategist of this school, Hagihara Shiogi could not. She had backtracked from my words, and from my attitude as I nonchalantly posed the quiz to her – and recognized that an incident had occurred, and recognized what the incident was. Reverse engineering is the expertise of strategists. Despite having realized time and again that this girl is a strategist – I still underestimated it. With just that little shred of information, she was able to grasp the entirety.

Such intellect.

Such sad, unfortunate intellect.

"Wa- no. But – the dean, the wireless."

Shiogi-chan had a half-laughing expression, like a ghost. There was not a trace of her prior elegance, as she wobbled to me - closer. As if she was looking for saving. As if she wanted a hug.

I felt conflicted. Should I lie? Could I cover this up by lying? Even if I could manipulate where Shiogi-chan went, would I be able to manipulate the truth that Shiogi-chan had arrived at? No, this was not a matter of could or could not – it was a matter of do, or do not.

Do I layer more lies to her?

Even though it is not nonsense?

"Hey, ... my—" her voice trailed after each word as she asked. "Is my **mother**, —"

"Yeah. For a while now, she has been killed."

The scammer did not lie.

2

But the impact on Shiogi-chan was probably greater the next moment.

Fwip fwip fwip – it sounded.

I heard a moaning sound as if the air were being sliced – and then, the right wrist that was flailing to grab my chest

rip

it seemed, as if **just a part had fallen off**, to be pulled from the arm – and then the the wrist having lost its root spun around and around in the air like it was just sliding on a surface it spun around around and around, and then it thudded onto the dark, unlighted hallway floor.

“– what.”

Shiogi-chan looked at her wrist with dazed eyes. And then she saw her right arm, which was missing the end. She did not scream. She even repressed making a hurt sound. She simply kept her eyes moving – and turned around.

It was too dark to see. Deep and unpleasant darkness. And a girl wearing black stepped out from that darkness–

“I guess I was found out–”

Along with that line.

“The more you plan, the more you succumb to your plan – just as Jun-san said. Really, really, I am a failure; this was a miscalculation; there were too many unexpected happenings – Hagihara-san and Saijou-chan of course, but Master, you know, was too much of a miscalculation. I figured Jun-san might use an assistant but... I never thought it would be **someone like this.**”

With a melancholic smile, –Yukariki Ichihime appeared.

“Ah... gh–”

Even though her wrist had been ripped off, Shiogi-chan never wavered – and charged at Hime-chan. Their distance was nothing like nine steps, it was further. And that long range – for Hime-chan.

For Zig Zag, it was futile.

Hime-chan shook her head slowly, as if thinking **there's no helping it, then**. And then she showed her **hand that was covered by a black glove** to Shiogi-chan and I.

"The more you plan, the more you succumb to your plan – that's why."

And then like the conductor of an orchestra.

She *flicked*¹⁾ her fingers – and dropped the finale.

"Your line of thought, snaps here."²⁾

Fwip – at the same time I thought I heard that sound Shiogi-chan's body went **twang** and stopped in mid-air, but even that was but an instant, as by the time one finished blinking – her body became pieces and zig zags – minced apart. Like a pile of blocks had crumbled, the head and chest and torso and shoulders and arms and hand and fingers and pelvis and butt and legs and feet, one by one in proper order splattered about the ground in a circle, and finally, blood began splurting.

It was the second time, so I was barely able to track it with my sight. The extremely thin **lines** crawling about the air like living beings. Blood sparkled and glittered. Darkness glowed and glittered. And then again, **fwip fwip** – it sounded.

It was the sound of Hime-chan recovering the string.

"– in the end, strategy cannot suppress a berserker, **senpai**."³⁾ If you wanted to live through this, then you needed to seal my arms and legs with a surprise attack

like the first time – or decide this outside, where I have to land my **string** on you directly. You had that chance twice, yet let me go both times – so you lost, Hagihara-san.”

And then Hime-chan said, “However.”

“I don't get it... for a strategist of your level, to wander into the **enemy** zone this stupidly. You were like a high school girl in a RomCom, it was pathetic. ... Not that it matters to me.”

She finished speaking to Shiogi-chan's rolling head, and then Hime-chan turned to me. A smile, filled with melancholy.

“I want to thank you... but it seems like you did not come to help me.”

“Nope nope,” Hime-chan nodded. “Hagihara-san, ended up realizing. Hime-chan, wanted to avoid killing students as much as possible—”

“You already killed one. Tamamo-chan.”

“Ahh. Yeah, true.”

As if she had completely forgotten.

“Right. Witnesses, are a bother.”

Yes – Zig Zag. That time, when we had rappelled from the school, she had acted like she was recovering her **string**, but she was probably actually pulling the wire she had wrapped around Tamamo-chan's neck.

“Well, by the time she'd already communicated to Hagihara-san it was too late, but oh well.”

“... I am still surprised that you can cut peoples' necks with your level of strength?”

"Yup. You know, Master – Hime-chan doesn't need **strength**. Friction. Pressure, Gravity, Magnetism. Tension, Pull, Resistance, Repulsion, Centrifugal Force, Centripetal Force. Action and Reaction. Pulley Laws and Franck-Condon Principles. Coefficient of Restitution and Coulomb's Friction Law – this world is, filled with strength. Hime-chan doesn't need to bother to have any **strength**–"

And then Hime-chan moved her fingers slightly. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but her gloves had layers and tens of layers and even more layers of **wires** wrapped around, like a puppeteer, or rather like an illusionist–

And the glass panes behind me shattered without a sound.

"Killing people is simple."

Yes. These were strings and a string user.

"– what a failure. Zig Zag is the name of the skill... and that was where a misunderstanding... or rather a slip occurred. Of course, Hime-chan took advantage of my misunderstanding and completely fooled me."

"I didn't deceive you. Though I did lie."

But – that made two of us.

"... when you told me about **Zig Zag**, I thought it was odd that you could explain it so well. Even though you were passing yourself off as not knowing anything else."

Like **Zig Zag** using more serious string... was just a bluff by Hime-chan. That string was sufficient. Regardless of how strong the string is, in the hands of a string-user it would be used to its fullest.

The gloves and such was also just a half-truth. When you think about it, there is no need to wear a glove twenty-four-seven. Just using string would be fine with

bare hands – only when you are going all-out to kill someone, yes, like the current situation.

Running away... cannot be done. Already, this hallway was probably filled with **string**, like a spider's nest. I could not see most of those (she was probably deliberately mixing visible string and invisible string), but I could deduce that much. After Hime-chan confirmed via wireless that we were still in the building, she went ahead of us and set up this trap.

This was literally **Zig Zag**. It is hard to explain, but confirming the position and strength of each and every strung string, then adjusting the force of each string, and then confirming that something has touched the string, and then confirming that nothing is touching the string, and then controlling all of that with just the fingers. Outside is one thing, but inside, where there are plenty of bumps and nooks to hang **string** and divide up the force on each one – Zig Zag was obviously invincible, and more importantly, was limitless in versatility. That time, when the four students did not so much as glance at me, made perfect sense. Why Tamamo-chan that time lost focus on me just by hearing Hime-chan's voice – this was the answer. If a berserker on a different tier appeared, then even that Tamamo-chan could not remain calm. Shiogi-chan waiting in ambush in the courtyard was also obvious. Spacious places are Hime-chan's biggest threat.

"Hah, I see..."

When we had stepped onto this floor, Shiogi-chan and I were already caught in the spider's nest.

"And the one who killed the dean was you, too."

"Yes," she nodded, as if that was nothing. And she continued, as if that was nothing. "Zig Zag aside, as you've realized that much, I have to kill Master, too."

"As I've realized it – eh. Did you think that would stay unsolved?"

"I did. I sought it. I wished it. I prayed it."

"....."

"Because Jun-san is soft on friends. She would never suspect Hime-chan."

Aikawa Jun's one blind spot.

That was not **betrayal** but **deception**. That person – trusts allies and never suspects them.

"But that is simply a blind spot and not a weakness," Hime-chan sadly continued.

"Can you... understand that? What kind of life Jun-san has lived to date, you must know a little, right? Jun-san has lived through a world in which everyone and everyone deceives each other, a world in which people first kill the person next to them to figure out what sort of person they were, she lived in such a world – and even though she's only seen the dirtiness of people – she still believes in others. Without – even suspecting Hime-chan."

It sounded like those words were said with some teariness. But Hime-chan refused to cry. She glared at me, constantly.

"To people like Hime-chan, it's a pretty nasty concept. For Aikawa Jun, with that much existence, to try so hard to be on equal footing with others. No, but that's why she's strong, I'm sure. Hime-chan can't copy that at all. I was suspecting Master all along, too. Leave it to me, you said, but I figured you would sell Hime-chan out anyways."

She tracked me not out of worry. Not just that, but the first time, when I left the dean's room, the reason why she followed, was simply to avoid risk. Everything was a lie, and everything was fake.

That she cried for me.

That she tried to stop me.

That she followed me.

That she helped me.

– by doing that, and smiling, that, too.

She was just acting out the type of girl I like.

“Because, you know, you can’t trust others!”

She said, strongly, and laughed. With strength and calm, as if forcibly retracing that innocent smile, but all she could muster, was a horribly twisted and warped one.

“They immediately betray, trick, make excuses. Look down others so easily. Even though they know it hurts when you’re hit, because they know it hurts when you’re hit, they hit others so easily. In other words, everyone, –everyone is fake.”

“..... is being alone lonely?”

“It’s lonely,” she immediately answered. “It’s lonely – but I’ll live alone. I’ll betray, trick, make excuses, and live alone.”

“I see... I see.”

“If I talk to you any longer I might develop feelings for you, so let’s just end this.”

And then Hime-chan flicked her fingers up – and then my body got **goosebumps**, from a disgusting feeling. Ahh, this, is because my body is wrapped with the **strings**. I see, in other words, all the way at the beginning, that felling when I first met Hime-chan at **Grade 2 Class A** – what is there to be said? I had already almost been killed by Hime-chan the first time we met. When I thought I saw the

locker shake, that was not seeing things, and feeling clumsy on my feet, too. That classroom was probably filled with string I could not see, too.

I had been killed.

That time, just from suspicion from having met the first time.

And this time, because I knew too much.

"I'll tell Jun-san that Master went home already. So, bye bye. Farewell, Master."

"— develop feelings, it is too late for me."

The fingers that were drawing down – stopped.

"... did you, say, something?"

"I wonder if this is the first time I have said it aloud. You were... viciously similar. To a girl that I broke when we were kids. That girl was very friendly, and never suspected people or grew angry at people, and always smiled, and was a really good person, and no matter what I did would forgive me, and more than anything, came to like me."

"... that's, not similar at all," Hime-chan mumbled, and looked at the floor. Looked at the floor, and mumbled, "Hime-chan, isn't a good person like that. Hime-chan's was just the outside. Always suspecting people, always irritated at people, and, liking someone, never. Everything was an act. Acting, is a lie. I was just acting along for you. And you know, ... there's no such thing as a person like that."

Not similar, just acting similar.

Because, such a person does not exist.

"Yeah, I thought so, too. A person **like this** cannot exist. That was why I – **broke that thing**. The fraud that is like, the powder that is trust, I completely stomped on it."

"....."

"It was satisfying. It was the greatest feeling. It cheers me up just thinking about it. Happiness probably feels like that. – and then..., that was why it became my greatest regret. I destroyed the irreplaceable real one. And then that girl became strong, like Aikawa-san. When she was demolished by the person she liked, there was no choice but to end there. Even though I understood that--"

Why am I doing such a thing.

To, speak about my own sin?

Confession? Don't kid me. Atoning for sins? Wrong.

Right – I was just redoing things.

Hime-chan's action of chasing after me may have been a lie, but the conversation that followed was not a lie. Even if those words were not directed toward me, but rather toward Hime-chan herself.

Hime-chan said everything was a lie.

I agree, that must be the truth.

But – really. Really, Really, you know.

If this world were like what Hime-chan said, if this world were like what I think.

We would not be suffering like this.

Do you get it?

If that trembling act of covering me from Shiogi-chan was an act – if that, too was a lie, then this world would only be left with lies. If everything is a lie and there is not one ounce of truth – if there is nothing of comparison, then, everything ends up being the truth, too.

“Why did you kill the dean?”

“Is it not enough that that person was the dean of this garden? Would you be satisfied if that person did something cruel to Hime-chan? If a friend was killed? If I was raped? If something precious was taken from me? If you become satisfied with the explanation congratulations? Don't mess with me. Killing someone isn't like that, Master.”

I was receiving a lecture about murder from a younger girl. What is sin, what is punishment, a seventeen-year-old girl eloquently spoke. It was an abnormal situation. Even within the zone of this Hanging High School, this was an unacceptable situation.

“Then let me change my question. Did you kill the dean because you wanted to leave this school? Or did you decide to leave the school as part of your plan for killing the dean?”

“Both. Neither.” Hime-chan said, coldly. “I wanted to destroy this Hanging High School. Everything without leaving a trace, without leaving a blade of grass, without leaving a shadow or shape or anything, I wanted to uproot it completely.”

“... at the beginning, when we were seen by those two girls, because you said nothing to me, was on purpose.”

“Yes. If we were able to escape, then I would not be able to go to the dean's room. I figured Jun-san would make the decision she made.”

"And when we were running, and I was carrying you, you grabbed the map from my pocket."

"If you have a map we wouldn't get lost."

"You did not use Zig Zag to dismember the dean because if you did, even Aikawa-san would figure it out."

"Yes. I may be able to fool her intuition but I can't fool her sight."

"So instead, by using a chainsaw as the means of dismemberment, you were able to fool her sight."

"It's almost like you were watching."

"And then you acted like the dean to draw in Shiogi-chan and others, and manipulated them."

"Exactly. I wouldn't say it went perfectly, though."

"Other than that – well, mysteries that needed to be solved are probably covered by that, so that is a good start. Now then, Hime-chan, now we get serious. Let us think about the future."

"... what?"

Hime-chan looked at me with suspicion. Her eyes were filled to the brim with negativity, and impossibility. ... I did not care either way about being killed, but even if it is a useless, pointless thing.

I will fulfill my duty.

That is – my job.

Everything around me goes insane. Strategies and calculations, everything never goes well, as expected.

Hime-chan.

I will destroy your goal. Your line of thought, I will slice it apart. Thoughts and wishes and wants and prayers, I shall shatter everything at once.

"Future...?"

"Yes. I feel bad when the future is vague. I feel bad when there are unknown factors. ... Indeed, while we are at it, might as well hope for a bright future."

"Y- you,"

"You know, Hime-chan, when you leave this academy, you have nowhere to go, right? Then you should come to my place. It is a pretty run-down apartment, but there is an opening on the first floor right now. The rent is, surprise, just a hundred. There is no bath but a public bath is nearby. I cannot call it a splendid apartment, but it is a fun place. The people who live there make it go. Houses are affected so much by the people who live in it, after all. I can guarantee that much. The first person I would introduce would be Asano Miiko-san, a swordsman. She is a cool big sister who takes care of you. She will take care of Hime-chan, for sure."

"... what, are,"

On the floor above that is grandpa Bateren. I do not know his real name, but he is quite funky, a rapper. He exudes fun just by looking at him. But he is pretty dangerous, so take care not to get too close... and then Ishinagi Moeta and Yamaguchi Houko, siblings. I cannot leave them out. The big brother is a dangerous type, but the little sister is an innocent and pure type. When they are sidling up to you, it is the best."

"What are you saying--"

"A high school girl that just moved into the area lives on the first floor. She would be Hime-chan's next-door neighbor. She is a junior at Roushisha University, and her name was Nanananami Nanami. This girl is the worst. I would like Hime-chan to beat her down with your carefreeness."

"What, are you saying—"

"And then I live on the second floor, so come play any time you want. School, probably is boring, though you should go anyways. Young people should not be living a life where every day is Sunday. You would not be able to find a job with your personality as it is, anyways, so we would have to transfer you somewhere. After having attended this dumb school, you might have trouble keeping up at first, but we will take care of you. Home tutors. Then **that alias** would really end up not being wrong."

"— I sa...."

And then with everyone – lets have a good time."

"What are you, saying!" Hime-chan finally exploded. "You're going to become zig zag! What're you talking about – I don't want to, hear about the future? Hime-chan – Hime-chan! Doesn't have, a future!"

Being able to think about the **future** is proof of composure. If you are living the now to its fullest, you have no time to think about such things.

Right now – I am living it.

Because no matter what I do, I will definitely, die.

"So is that why you want to do a double-suicide with this school? Then that is but a child's selfishness. To be dragged into a girl's rotten emotion like that, sucks to be me."

"Girl's, rotten – you said?"

"Am I wrong? Your methods are underhanded and rotten – and more than anything else, you are a cute girl. You are so much better off than this rotten boy, yet you are cutting away the future... that was why – you did not want to be despised by the same gender, Aikawa-san, right? You did not want Aikawa-san to think of you as a **murderer**. You did not care about anyone other than Aikawa-san, after all... and you know, if this is the end, you wanted to be with Aikawa-san at the end, or something? Sentimentalism or romanticism, or maybe just heroism... regardless, it is quite different from the stoicism I like. Truth be told, I am a bit disappointed. In you."

"What – what do you know!" Hime-chan, this time, for real, was crying. Not a lie, but real tears. Without hiding her tears, she yelled at me. With a voice so loud I wondered if her throat would break, as if accusing me. "Don't talk about others like you know! What do you know about someone who thinks killing is normal!"

"At the very least, I know you are just a little girl who is crying up a storm. In the end, you are just afraid, are you not? You are afraid, because you do not know if Aikawa-san will accept you. You are suspicious of Aikawa-san's trust in you. That is why, you are doing such a, testing thing."

I could understand her feelings as if they were my own.

Because I know my own.

Even though I know my own.

"**What if Aikawa Jun dislikes me – and then, even if she does not dislike me, if I am such a small existence that she does not dislike me even if I do such a deed –**"

"–... ahahah."

Hime-chan suddenly, abruptly eliminated her emotions – positive and negative, life and death, eliminated everything – and then like spinning in the darkness, she turned everything over – into emotionlessness.

"Thank you, Master."

She said, with the clearness of emptiness.

"I was able to see a good dream, in the end."

And then, like the conductor of an orchestra.

"..... Cool. That is good."

Did not work.

Well of course, for a person like myself who cannot take care of even myself, for a person like me, to take care of the soul of someone else. It meant I failed. So it was truly useless.

Even if I showed her a good dream–

If it is a shameless, pitiful reality, then it has no meaning.

An aimless equation for no use.

"Ah, by the way... I never asked for your name."

"....."

At the end, I once again wavered. Despite having tried to save this girl, ... this time I thought of destroying her. I hesitated, wondering if I should shove this girl off the cliff she was straddling. If I can break her, can anyone fault me for breaking her?

It must feel great.

To break a fantastic girl.

"As things have come to this, I can't call you Master anymore... so I'll call you by your name. Please tell me."

Please tell me your name. Tell her my name without leaving out a single letter. And then cut this Zig Zag apart and leave no trace.

"..... Well."

But, I did not do such a thing.

It did not seem like doing such a thing would be needed.

"... I guess I was able to buy you enough time to change?"

"...? What? Is that, your name?"

Said Hime-chan, carelessly.

Ahh, gosh – such a good person.

Everyone and everyone, such good people.

Now it looks like I am the villain.

"I am just talking to myself... not to you. And, **you're the one who said it.**"

"..... huh?" she seemed not to understand, closing one eye. "You know, Hime-chan, was asking for your name—"

"I said it and Shiogi-chan said it – but the first person to say it was you.

Aikawa-san is soft on friends."

".....?"

"Indeed, I left the dean's room on my own accord..... but, for the person who brought me to the Hanging High School in the first place to not come to help me– is a lonely story, don't you think?"

".....!"

And Hime-chan spun around as fast as she could.

And in front of her –

Red as the flames and crimson as the ruby.

Scarlet as hell itself and red while streaming blood.

The contractor smiled a cynical smile.

And simply existed.

¹⁾ Interestingly enough, Nishio uses the kanji 喰 here, which is read “ku(u),” while flick is written くい (kui). It's a pun but also a means of depicting the action of the strings. Can't really translate this directly into English, but there you go.

²⁾ Pun! 意図 (ito, which means will/ambition) in the style of 糸 (ito, meaning string).

³⁾ Strategy is written 策 (saku), and while writing “berserker” Nishio makes it read as “Zig Zag” (this is a reference to earlier mentions by Ii-chan about Zig Zag being a berserker-type fighter), so it ends up being a pun about how a “Saku” can't beat “Zigu Zagu”... this probably makes more sense if you understand the Japanese alphabet.



**Aikawa Jun,
the contractor.**

The Seventh Act

Overkilled Red

*There is a reason for the bullied.
And the bully creates results.*

1

What in the world is meant by **strength**? Similar to the basis of fortune and misfortune, if we consider that strength and weakness is simply a matter of personal perception, then one argument could be made that rejecting everything other than yourself is strength, and supporting everything other than yourself is weakness. And if that is not the case, when you decide on something, then you require a basis and intervals.

Is simple strength? Or perhaps it is a large existence? or perhaps physical durability, or perhaps mental durability? Those who stand at the top of the stairs disdaining others cannot be called the strongest. Yet being able to perform every task, being talented in every skill, simply merits being called an all-rounder and not the high end. Perfecting a single ability becomes simply a single genius. It is not acquiring what you want, nor the ability to eradicate all. Undefeated and invincible alone does not point toward the strongest. Honor and pride are both relational. Then what exactly, what is similar and what is equal, such that one can determine one to be the strongest – the more you think about it, the more you end up in a thesis of your own making.

Yet if you put forth these reasonings, she would probably flash a nihilistic smile as always, and answer like this–

I am the strongest, and as the strongest there needs be no reason.

"You know..."

Aikawa-san raised both arms, as if to show off her pure red outfit, and looked at Hime-chan and I at once. Her face still had a cynical smile plastered.

"I need **this** for the climax, y'know? When it's showtime, and I show up in black clothing, it just doesn't feel right. Nah nah, I left the academy for a moment and went back to the Cobra, and that ended up taking up more time than I thought. Sorry I'm late, Ii-tan."

Hime-chan was shaking **tat-tat-tat**. Her entire body was shaking. Why Aikawa-san was there, no, why she was in a different place than Aikawa-san, as if she could not comprehend.

"I do not mind... buying time at the last moment is the user of nonsense's expertise, right, Aikawa-san?"

"I said don't call me by my surname... the only ones that do are **enemies**. –So," Aikawa-san did not stop smiling, as she fixed her gaze on Hime-chan. "**So, which name are you going to call me?**"

"Ah, uh–"

"What're you up to, hmm?"

"... ah..."

"I'm asking what you're up to? Eh?"

"Is this–"

Hime-chan.

"Is this the end, just like that?"

Hime-chan still shook.

"Why–"

With her shaking voice. But with all her might.

"– why did it go bad?"

With a soft voice that threatened to disappear, she screamed in pain.

"What was wrong? What?" Hime-chan asked, not Aikawa-san, but toward me. "I thought... I thought a lot, and it should have gone well, but. Hime-chan, what – did I do something bad?"

"... Hime-chan."

"Is that, why everything went so wrong?"

"Like that matters shit," Aikawa-san said, interrupting. "**The more you plan, the more you succumb to your plan**" – you thought too much, and Ii-tan too. And that girl rolled around on the ground there. Ahh, ahh, the hallway's covered with blood now. Jeez – do y'all have nothing better to do? Puh-lease, don't tell me you think everything can be explained with logic?"

Aikawa-san scratched her head, her body language expressing how much she considered this all a pain in the ass, and also how much she didn't understand. And then she sighed, a short sigh that lasted forever.

"Logic only means one plus one is two. Thesis just means zero plus zero is zero. If you wanna see pretty logic then go read a math textbook for first-graders. Running off and leaving it to that elementary crap – are you serious!?"

She shouted.

She was no longer laughing – she was angry.

Extremely. She was intensely angry.

"It's over or this is the end or... stop howling and howling you pathetic loser! I'm just listening and you're making me blush! The hell do you think you're doing making me even redder! Ahh? If you survive alone you'll call it everything went well? You start it and then end it and are you kidding me? This idiotic play never had a chance retard! Brats without any reasonable trauma need to shut up and put up! Don't make me punch you!"

"... ah. Auh..."

Hime-chan had tears flowing down her cheeks as she took a step back, pushed back by the immense pressure. Already my body no longer had that discomfort of being covered by **string**. In front of Aikawa Jun, she had no composure to keep wrapping me up – and hostages would only backfire against Aikawa-san. Hime-chan must know that well. That was why she wanted to keep Aikawa-san on her side.

No – that was not the reason.

There was that, too, but Hime-chan just wanted, simply.

"Not funny – not funny at all, to me! If you're gonna oppose me, make me laugh! Everyone and everyone looks away from what they really gotta do, and then they make excuses and lie and try to cover shit up – crawling around like dirty scum! Stop being a slob! It's simple, don't slack! Why don't you people stand up straight! Stop slouching!"

I said...

I said, we cannot do that.

Hime-chan, and myself.

Yet still, Aikawa-san's fury did not end.

"Stick out your chest, straighten your back, be proud of yourself, howl at the enemy don't bow down! Don't give up don't let go and don't end it yourself! Do you brats want to be sympathized over? Stop dragging other people into your own narcissism, and if you want to brood then brood by yourself, no one knows or cares about how you freaks feel! Stop rejecting everything for beans and stop carelessly accepting! I don't care about other stuff, at least decide your own stuff!"

"... shut up!"

Hime-chan seemed to force her guts down and then stared – at Aikawa-san. The tears were no longer there. Nowhere. She no longer had the eyes of a young girl – but rather the eyes of Zig Zag, cut apart somewhere, and having no normal parts left after having been cut apart.

Everything was an act.

Innocence and recklessness. And action and fondness.

If everything was an act – she could still have been saved.

"This is the end! Everything was found out... I killed people – I broke a promise and I betrayed–"

Betrayed and betrayed and betrayed.

Deceiving allies before deceiving enemies.

Just repeating that over and over again.

Hime-chan was painful to look at. It was hard to look at her. Very, hard to just abandon her.

"Just... stop, Hime-chan–"

"Shut up shut the hell up and zip it! Stop calling me by that name! You act so intimate!"

Hime-chan screamed, and glared at me. With her eyes wide open. Not a hint of innocence or cuteness. Yet, more than anything, her expression invited pity.

"Stop being kind! Stop acting up and trying to be friendly! That stuff – is disgusting!"

"... Hime-chan."

"What's with that face? Is it sad? Are you trying to sympathize? You said you hate murderers... but that's a grateful story. But – the dean and Saijou-chan, Hagihara-san aren't the only ones."

And then she flashed eyes that were filled with hatred from the bottom of her soul, such a mismatch for her, and with a look of pity.

"Why – do you think **faculty** and **security** never showed up?"

They had no chance of showing up, because **that** had been taken care of before I snuck into the academy–

I imagined.

Faculty ward. Faculty room.

One floor beneath the dean's room – in a closed location.

The mountain of death and rivers of blood that sprawled over the closed area.

Murderer, was not sufficient.

Serial killer, was also not right.

Restricted to this area.

Restrained by walls on four sides, there was no chance of seeing that appearance.
The living – nor the dead. Until the collapse, there is no chance of seeing.

And then –

When it collapses, it is too late.

"This school is over, either way."

"You're right, that might be true," Aikawa-san answered. "But I won't let you end."

She pointed at Hime-chan.

"I won't let it end."

"... I said! It's enough, Aikawa-san! That's enough of an end!"

Hime-chan shouted Aikawa-san in that way – and then flung out both of her arms.

Fwip fwip fwip fwip – like the cries of children, the sound of air being sliced echoed through the hallway, and at the end of it was Aikawa Jun. The size and the speed made it impossible to track **them**. Yes, the moment one stepped foot inside this hallway, the indisputable fact was that one stepped into Hime-chan's spider nest. In this visibility, even mankind's strongest, within this sealed, bumpy area, could not avoid the **strings** that attacked at full force from every angle.

Yet, the contractor–

Did not even try to dodge.

Invisible string wrapped around Aikawa-san's body. Hime-chan did not expect this either, and she froze. She looked at Aikawa-san in surprise, and Aikawa-san venomously answered.

"What? Did you want me to dodge? Are you seriously still waffling now? Or is it something else, like, hahah, you wanted me to finish you?"

"... uh, guh."

"Spot on was it? But too bad-. I loooooooooove you. So I'm going to go easy on you at the easiest of the easy levels. Don't think I'll kill you that easily. I'm going to warmly loooooove you so that you'll never again be able to get away from me. Hah, you're right, someone as stupid as you needs to die once to get fixed."

"Stop, screwing, around-!"

Hime-chan shook **tat-tat** as she bit down hard on her bottom lip. But that was no longer fear. It was rage – at Aikawa-san. Or perhaps a warrior's excitement – as a berserker.

"But you know, you've gotten better, I'll praise you there. You didn't even need to put weights at the end of the strings to throw them this accurately. ... you have a nice career in circuses waiting for you. What are you, Yamashiro Takuya? I can't believe you mastered this pain-in-the-ass skill. Or what is it? Has Hime-chan still not gotten over **that**?"

She was obviously goading, laughing at Hime-chan. And despite Hime-chan being in an inordinately superior position – despite being in her own territory, her face twisted at the humiliation of being insulted, and she yelled.

"It's already checkmate, don't you get it, Aikawa-san!"

"Fresh-made Pawns shouldn't howl on their own. Unfortunately for you, I was born a Queen – including kings, checkmates on lesser pieces don't matter to me."

Hime-chan set her resolve – and yet for one moment, she hesitated. Still, the moment was nothing more than a single moment, and along with her resolve, she raised both arms at once–

"The end! Your line of thought–"

And then the end–

"Then first, despair. I've *been* pissed, fucking brat."

And then–, it must have been me seeing things, but in a kind way, Aikawa-san smiled– and then–

"And don't worry. You and I, there's no way we can be cut apart."

2

The end – right before it was brought down, Hime-chan herself, crumpled to the floor of the hall. Or rather, she seemed to have been pulled by the arm she was bringing down, as her upper body was tugged forth, knocking her off balance. With an expression of bewilderment, onto the floor of the hall she clumsily fell, face down.

"..... what? Huh?"

"What's wrong? Didja slip? Hmm?"

Aikawa-san – of course, was not diced up. With an attitude of complete dominance, she had a thin smile. Hime-chan tried to quickly stand back up, but that failed, too, as if she was struggling with gravity, and once again fell face-first to the floor.

As for Aikawa-san – it did not seem as though she had done anything. Of course, at this range, there was nothing that Aikawa-san could do. Since she had no

projectile weapons, unless she used some sort of ESP, it was impossible for her to do anything to trip Hime-chan–

No.

Did she move a bit?

“It looks like you're using a lot of types of **string** to mix up the weight and speed and thickness – but string user attacks always are the same. In other words, cutting through **speed** and **edge**. The same way you cut bread, I guess. Then there're two main ways of avoiding that – the first is to **move slowly**. The other is to **move quickly**.”

It was clearly paradoxical, what Aikawa-san said. Hime-chan paid it no heed, frantically trying to stand up, but every time, as if she were being pulled by something, she would trip and fall without being able to brace herself. As if – as if **she were being manipulated by string you cannot see**.

“– Ah.”

“Get it? Ii-tan. Yup, that's it. As long as I'm outside of the **zone of string** set up right there – it means the string that's wrapped around me, regardless of where else it might be attached to, ends up at those gloves. Then it's simple, isn't it? Faster than Hime's fingers or arms, that's all I have to do. Stronger than her strength, and faster than her speed.”

When I realized it – again, Aikawa-san was standing in a different place. And at the same time, Hime-chan, as if her arms were being pulled, fell down again. It was the same logic as a leash on a dog. However, Hime-chan just had to move her fingers, that was all the motion she needed. In that sense, Hime-chan's small stature and small reach was perfect for a string user. The speed of the motion to raise and lower her arms is lower than anyone else, so it gave her quite an advantage. By comparison Aikawa-san was not only wrapped entirely in string,

but she also had to move her entire body. Because of this, it was not as simple as it may possibly sound.

"The vulnerability for strings as a tool of killing is that there's a time lag between contact and impact. That time lag is decisive against me. No matter how fast your string is – it's still one-hundred years too late for me. If the speed is the same, then whoever's stronger wins – it's the same as tug-of-war, Ichihime. It's a shame you're weak. Strength is necessary, eh? I don't know how much dangerous string is wrapped around me, but as long as I move faster than the string, this is just an accessory. Hah, I toldja this is just a circus act. If all you can kill is something immobile, then you can't be a serial murderer, **just the same.**"

"Sh- shut up– shut up shut up–" Hime-chan glared at Aikawa-san, still sprawled on the floor. "Th- this–"

Of course. This is impossible. Moving an entire body faster than she can move her fingers is unbelievable. As if Aikawa-san were not fast but rather than I am just slow, as if Aikawa-san were not the one moving and that Hime-chan and I were simply observers, as if this instantaneous movement that was just like ESP were ordinary.

There was no time lag at all between moving and beginning to move. The start and end were happening at the same time. It was not that her action was fast, but rather the action from the action to the action was fast.

"Ahh, ahh. I shoulda figured this is all there is to a brat," Aikawa-san raised her jaw and with a dry, malicious laugh looked down at Hime-chan sprawled on the ground. "I was right, a death match with you is boring, so I'm done."

"Done? Stop messing around – **if that's the case, I can still work around it!**" Hime-chan wailed. "And, even if you can block a direct attack, as long as you can't get inside this zone, Aikawa-san–"

"I said, listen to people. We're **connected** to the point that you can't even cut us apart, didn't I say that?"

Aikawa-san opened her closed fist, and revealed that stungun. Hime-chan's eyes widened in surprise, but it was too late. There was no chance of recovering string while lying down, and the string was being controlled by Aikawa-san's instantaneous movements anyways. Once Hime-chan realized that, she tried to remove her gloves, but–

As expected, it was too late.

She was a hundred years too slow to take on Aikawa Jun.

Aikawa-san pressed the tip of the stungun into her own arm, and then flicked the switch.

The spark was but a moment – was not the case.

Before that moment, far before, specifically by the time Hime-chan had decided to try to take on Aikawa-san, the match had been decided.

Still sprawled out, Hime-chan seemed to freeze, as if time had stopped. Then she **jerked** and arched like dried seaweed, and froze in that position – after another moment her body began **spewing** black smoke, and plopped, like a puppet whose string was cut, back onto the floor. It seemed she had completely lost consciousness, but as a natural reaction by her physical body, cramped into **jerking** motions.

"Jeez... right after I changed, too."

Aikawa-san seemed to mourn her clothing, which had been fried and burnt like Hime-chan, and began tearing off bits and pieces. Her shoulder and stomach areas became bare, so it was quite a pleasant sight, but I had no time to stare, as I looked at Hime-chan again. Her muscles were still twitching. Especially her

fingers, which took the full brunt of the electricity, were twitching pretty nastily. As if each finger had its own mind.

"Guah. I forgot, **Aramid Fibers** doesn't have conductivity. A bunch of them are still stuck. This one's Kevlar? Shit, / have to take off this mess? What a pain in the ass."

Aikawa-san grumbled as she un-knotted the string wrapped around her body that had not been fried by the electricity. The string had lost its master for recollection, so it seemed to be troublesome. I thought that this sight of Aikawa-san was rather amusing as I asked, "So this was what the stungun was for." It is my job to ask these questions.

"Yeah. Didn't I say so? **I needed to drag someone out unharmed**, or something."

"I thought you were talking about me."

"Oh? Why? I would never do such a cruel thing to my beloved Ii-tan."

Aikawa-san was engaging in self-concealment.

"Well, taking care of short-sighted kids is my part of my job. If I were to take on this Zig Zag normally, I wouldn't be able to avoid hurting her."

This person gets weaker by using weapons.

An explanation may be unnecessary, but – just in case. Aikawa-san took that palm-sized stungun and hammered electricity into Hime-chan's **string**, electricity that in her words were enough to knock out two, three days of someone's memories, with the safety restraints removed. She unleashed the absolute limits of its electricity and pumped more voltage than normal. It was no different than touching a high-electricity power line. It was not just a stungun attack... but rather like a gigantic spark that was made using gunpowder. Fireworks were

happening at various points along the hall, and even I felt it to some level just by being close, that was how ridiculous the power was.

No matter how resilient those different types of string may be, most could not stand the voltage and amount at the same time, and exploded and burnt – that moment for them to burn was enough. The master would take the maximum amount of damage. Aside from the **string** that did not conduct electricity, everything became Aikawa-san's weapon.

If the opponent's card is speed, then to dominate with superior speed. If the opponent uses string, then to use the string against them. Hime-chan felt as though she had trapped Aikawa-san within her spider's nest – but it was actually the opposite.

No matter how large a nest a spider spins,

Eagles can rip right through it.

"....."

..... of course, that meant that Aikawa Jun, who was connected to the **string**, was under the same condition, but in Aikawa-san's case (what was she thinking) she had placed the stungun to her own arm, so she had eaten the same high-powered, no, you might say she had eaten **even more** of the high-powered electricity, so this was supposed to be like the conclusion wrought by a suicide terrorist, but Aikawa-san seemed to be perfectly fine. Neither her consciousness nor her memories seemed to have been flung, and aside from her clothing she did not seem to have taken any damage. Because the underside of the clothing she had switched into was made of a non-conductive strands – that Aikawa Jun had gone through the effort of changing into it for this purpose... or some sort of explanation like that would make this more reasonable, but I could not imagine this contractor feeling the need to make anything reasonable. This

person could probably fly a plane into the barrel of a cannon and come home safe. Trying to explain something unreasonable with reason is self-destructive. The next number of zero is not reason but one.

"Woah! The string got caught! And it's digging into my skin, ow! Hey, you, stop watching and help! Are you some demon!?"

"....."

I wordlessly walked to Aikawa-san and tediously untied one **string** at a time. The tips of my fingers were cut a bit, but I was able to un-knot the string enough for Aikawa-san to be able to move freely.

"Uni-. Thank you Ii-chan. Wa-i. Ii-chan I love you!"

"Stop that."

Seriously, no.

"Nah, but I was just trying to give the cast more equal screentime..."

"Then imitate Akari-san's voice."

"What's with the specific name..."

"... however, for you to be angered. That was unexpected," I said, looking at the fallen Hime-chan. "Not accusing, not forgiving, but just simple anger."

"I hate you! I do not want to even see your face so please die, pig!"

".....?"

"Chiga Akari."

"No, can we drop that?"

Although I was a bit pleased.

"..... Hah. I'm absurdly tolerant, but I've got a short temper. Unlike you. Actually, a week ago I turned into Super Saiyan Jun."

"Huh....."

It may be true.

"It's fun taking on someone like Zerozaki-kun, a simple-minded idiot. But people like you, these dawdling, logic-focused idiots piss me off the most."

"... you make it sound like a school-life drama. Although this place does not feel like a high school..."

"Teacher, I just wanted you to look at me, or something? What era is that drama from? But you know, Ii-tan. It actually doesn't matter, that." Aikawa-san smiled, and continued. "A lecture from me wouldn't get through to that. You were the one that finished the lecture. No matter what I say, it'd just come across as an untouchable perspective. It's like walking up to a starving guy and saying **thou shalt live with only bread**, they'd just be like **"fuck off!** right? You're in a similar place, so you already ended the lecture. All I had to do was clean up afterwards."

Was that so?

I felt like that was not the case, but if that were the case... then even if just a bit, maybe I was able to save Hime-chan. I, an existence that could not save, and the existence who could not be saved, Hime-chan. Even if that were to be a broken paradox.

"Of course, hahah, no matter what cool line you might spew, you're dressed in a skirt, so it doesn't have any impact."

"If only you stayed silent about this, no one would have to know. ... in any case, it is finally over."

"I said," Aikawa-san lightly punched my head. "Don't try to end things on your own. You know-. Understand this, alright? Life doesn't end even if you die."

"Even if you die," what a fresh opinion.

"Yeah. Even if you die, your effects remain. A true end doesn't exist anywhere. It's the same for that... but she'll figure it out when she becomes a bit more of an adult, maybe? And if you don't get it, just act like you do. That's enough to make a big difference."

"Although I do not want to understand." And then I lowered my gaze to Hime-chan. "... What will Hime-chan do, now? If this school is a dead body, ... but with such a large incident, I feel like it is no longer a question of escaping or being expelled? She killed the dean."

"How should I know? My job was to take Ichihime outside, and after that it'd be overtime – I'd love to say that. But I guess I can't really. It's not like I don't know her, so, I know, I'll just figure something out."

"Is that so."

Indeed, this person was soft on friends.

That, however, that was definitely part of what made the strongest the strongest.

"In any case, let's hand her over to the police."

"You're scum!"

"Wahwah! Ikkun got mad! I only said the obvious! Like **strip poker, except the tournament is filled with heat and wounds!**"

"Can you just drop that!?"

No one could stop Aikawa Jun anymore.

"Kahaha. Well it's a pretty good masterpiece."

This time, Aikawa-san acted like a human failure as she sat down by Hime-chan's side. And then, looking resigned and saddened, she slid her hand along Hime-chan's sleeping face, as she had finally stopped twitching.

"If you look at her sleeping, she's just a cute brat... jeez. Fucking brat."

She mumbled.

Aikawa-san was like an older sister being lovingly exasperated by a troublesome little sister, and it was a bit heartwarming, I felt. Aikawa-san was absolutely not a kind person, and she was totally not someone who brought happiness, but even so, probably, she was not the type of person who could leave behind a girl like Hime-chan.

"... Hm."

"What is it?"

"Whoops. Her heart's stopped."

"That's an endless sleep!"

Please be careful when handling stunguns.

But seriously.

"Ahh, ahh, how can she just die?"

"What the hell!"

"The suspect is somewhere here!"

"It's only you! And what point was there in taking off the stungun limiter in the first place!? The normal amount was enough for knocking her out!"

"But then the string wouldn't burn up."

It was because taking care of the string was a pain in the butt!

"Don't worry. I'll revive her in a bit... don't get so disheveled. Ii-tan your selling point is your dryness. Take care of your rare characteristic."

She said, as Aikawa-san prepared to start heart massage, but then she looked at me, as if she had changed her mind.

"Ii-tan, you wanna try? It's a good chance to gain the title of a pedo."

"Please stop playing with peoples' lives! Please, it is a serious moment!"

"What, no? I guess resuscitation is a bit necrophiliac."

"Yes yes, even I do not have corpses within my allowable bounds – no, really!"

The user of nonsense, out of pure momentum, did a on-and-off jab¹⁾ for the first time in his life.

"Please stop fooling around! Do you have an illness where you can only be serious for five seconds!?"

"You're so boring... boring. Idiot. Dumbass. I hate Ikkun!"

And then finally, Aikawa-san began rescue operations. As she performed heart massage, I heard the sound of ribs cracking, but that could not be helped, I made myself believe. Five minutes, ten minutes she continued, and then she finally stood up, "alright, done."

"She's revived, she's revived."

"How light..."

Dying and living, killing or being killed, even those things could be re-done or restarted by this mankind's strongest. This went straight past exasperation and into feeling hollow.

Really – to this person, it was nothing. Acting and lying, counterfeit and fraud, everything and anything, was irrelevant to Aikawa Jun. Even if there were relevancy – there was no meaning.

Aikawa-san lifted Hime-chan onto her back, then stood up.

"Shall I carry her? Jun-san might be tired."

"... Nyah."

Aikawa-san shook her head.

"This is my job."

And carrying Hime-chan on her back, Aikawa-san walked down the halls. I walked next to her, and confirmed, "in any case, this is the end of one interval."

"This academy no longer has a dean or a strategist – so all that remains is to escape, correct?"

"....."

"Why is your response just four three-point ellipses?"

Was she imitating Teruko-san?

Even I can do that.

"No, Ichihime," Aikawa-san said, without looking at me. "Was able to manipulate, hide information from the students inside, but it seems she did nothing for **outside**. There're some people who found out about what happened inside the academy."

"..... what do you mean?"

"The alumni of Hanging High School whom are working in Rule right now. Ah, and the Origami household's smarties. And of course everyone who supports Sumiyuri Academy around the country."

"Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"If everyone is gathered outside the school gate."

"....."

Was... that why she was late in changing?

Then, right now the first floor, would be the biggest problem...

"Oh well. Time to clean up after the party. Let's charge through like a bold hurricane right up front before they start pouring in."

Aikawa-san said, enjoying this, and walked down the dark, low-visibility hallway. Leisurely, truly in an open-hearted manner, without any trace of anxiety, she walked.

"— you make me laugh."

I simply, simply followed behind that mankind's strongest, with a sigh mixed with something like nonsense.

¹⁾ Noritsukkomi in Japanese, means to go with the fool's joke for a moment and then immediately shoot the straightman line.



Me (narrator)
The protagonist.



After Act

The Honor of the Lily of the Valley

Between using people as things, and using things as people, the question is not which one is more insane, and it is crystal clear which is more bothersome to others – the rest of the story is completely truncated, and some bit of time passed.

I was hospitalized in a hospital within Kyoto. One week for full recovery. That was the diagnosis for my body. As to how I ended up like this, there is no need to explain. If I may be allowed one thing, for the weakest to be by the strongest you cannot simply take, and must pay some price. I think it was a fairly inexpensive purchase for only needed a few bones. I am going on a bit of a trip at the start of next month with Kunagisa, so as long as I can get out by then it is fine.

As for whether hospitalized life is boring, not particularly. I was still in the middle of reading the book I had borrowed from Miiko-san, and to begin with, as long as I have enough space to sleep with my legs out, it does not matter to me the place. Well, as long as that is not an abnormal place.

It was the day before I was expected to leave the hospital that Aikawa Jun showed up at my hospital room. This time she did not knock. It appeared the knocking trend inside Aikawa-san had ended. Had she refitted it, or perhaps she had many of the same design, but in any case she was in her normal crimson suit.

"Yoo, long time no see and wait-. I was called and I arrive Beethoven! Hey, hey, you've got a personal room! You're rich, man."

"I just cannot stand sleeping in the same room as someone else. I feel goosebumps just by imagining someone I do not know looking at my sleeping self. It costs a bit, but it cannot be helped."

"Mmm. Good news for you, then."

Aikawa-san said, robotic-ally tossing an envelope onto my bed. It was thick. But there needed no questioning nor asking as to its contents.

"Well, you did help me out, so your share."

"I have no need, of money. With the state Hime-chan ended up in, Jun-san could not have made much money either, so I am fine with going without pay this time."

"Pretty stoic, huh. You should take these, though. When you have no money it's the same as having no neck, they say."

"Necks, cut it or strangle it or hang it, it does not make a difference. And your words simply means that money is not absolutely necessary."

"Hah, your shepherd."

She chuckled, as she sat in the pipe chair for visitors. Not that I could imagine that Aikawa-san had come to visit, but, I also could not tell her to not sit.

"But forcing you to help and then doing nothing in return goes against my policy. Alright then. How about this, I'll let you hear moaning with Hikari's voice."

"Please stop."

"Ah, no, no! That's! Stop playing with me! Ahh, no! I said stop!"

"You stop!"

"You actually snapped!" Aikawa-san seemed genuinely surprised as she put both of her hands up. "Wow, I'm shocked. ... I'm sorry. I didn't think you treated her with that much reverence. ... Sorry. Please forgive me. I was wrong."

Her apologetic voice was that of Maki-san.

She knew what she was doing.

"... So, what really did you come for?"

"Nothing really. Didn't you want me to come? You ended up not knowing anything to the end, after all. I came to answer questions."

"Huh... it is my policy to avoid probing and stepping into things that seem dangerous. But, I shall ask," I began, unable to figure out Aikawa-san's true intent. "Hime-chan, what happened to her?"

"You start off with the toughest one to answer. Ahh. Himecchi," Aikawa-san stuck her hand into the gift basket she had brought, took out an apple, and bit into it without peeling off the skin. "That stungun really did work. She's got amnesia, and is in a secret hospital."

"Huh..."

"Her body's pretty messed up, too. She was already being forced through some whack training so her body was all messed up here and there, and then that damage, y'know? Her whole body was burnt. Especially her fingers, since they were tied to the **string**. Those gloves were made up seventy-percent of non-conductive material, so that helped a bit, but it's like she can hold a pencil but not chopsticks. You know? Ohm's Law. Jule's Law."

"... So she will be stuck with aftereffects."

Even though a stungun had been used to capture her without hurting her, but I guess this was still better than actually taking on Aikawa-san.

"That's why it's tough," she said. "Because she's got amnesia, it means Origami Noa and the other faculty, or maybe even Hagihara Shiogi or Saijou Tamamo, that she'd killed them... and even the Hanging High School, she might have

forgotten everything. And for her fingers to be damaged, as long as that never heals, she can't use Zig Zag anymore. You get it, right?"

For a moment, I thought Aikawa-san had taken off the limiter for the stungun for that exact purpose. Zig Zag along with the accursed memory, all sealed away in one swoop. Even if this is too much sentimentalism and too storybook-like.

"It's tough. Because it doesn't mean what she's done goes away. The ones who were killed wouldn't be able to rest easy. The Origami household and Rule, they're all going nuts trying to find the suspect."

Just because the perpetrator forgot does not mean the crime disappears and that no punishment is needed. No matter what, for whatever reason, responsibility must be taken. That is obvious, but still.

"And if I were to say **none of this happen** and forgive Ichihime, I feel like you would reject me forever."

"That is rather unexpected. Jun-san, do you mind other peoples' opinions?"

"No? If the opinion is someone else's, I don't care."

She grinned, a terrible smile. I did not know why, but it seemed she was teasing me, so I just shrugged my shoulders and changed the question.

"So how did everything end?"

"The Hanging High School was broken up. Exactly the way Ichihime wanted. The students... no clue. That part is still a bit hazy. And then, no one's figured out that we're the suspects."

I have been turned into an accomplice.

"Don't worry, I'm talking around... and the Origami house owes me some so that's fine. Rule might be a problem... but I'll make sure that never swings over

to you. But Ichihime... I'd like to cover for her, but I don't know if that's the right thing to do."

"Even Jun-san hesitates?"

"Not that I want to. Her memories might come back and her fingers might heal. I also don't want to dote over her too much, you know. Although it'd be different if she were to ask me directly to cover up the killings."

And that she did not – was because Hime-chan was unable to believe in Aikawa-san all the way through. That was neither Aikawa-san's fault nor Hime-chan's fault, and just unfortunate. Like me, probably, Hime-chan could fundamentally not trust other people. And because of that, because we end up relying on others – we end up with half-assed strategies like the one she had used, and as a result, fall apart because of it. More than fear or terror – it may simply be pride and admiration.

"... but, why did Hime-chan kill the dean in the first place... no, what did she want to eliminate the school? What sort of plan was this at the start, anyways?"

"Before that, let me apologize," Aikawa-san scooted her chair closer, and then leaned toward me. "When I said **Ask Ichihime herself about specifics... she will be able to explain better** at the start, that was a lie, sorry."

"... of course."

I figured that from just speaking to her. Hime-chan could not explain the situation. Regardless of lies or acting, I could definitely state that.

"Hime-chan has trouble with Japanese, so there was no shot at her actually explaining anything."

"I figured it'd go better if you didn't know the details. But I didn't think Ichihime herself would deceive you so aggressively. ... what'd you hear was the reason for her language problems?"

"Umm. She said she was raised in America."

"I see. But, that's wrong," Aikawa-san poked my temple with her index finger.

"The frontal lobe. She's got a posteriori obstruction to her frontal lobe."

"....."

"You know what the frontal lobe is for? Personality and self-consciousness, and communication with others. Ichihime was **damaged** there. That's why she gets troubled by language. Or rather, she doesn't comprehend it."

"Comprehend..."

Language comprehension.

No, noun comprehension.

"That's why when you talk to her, there'll always be some misunderstanding. It's like a Japanese person and a Chinese person conversing in Korean, there's always something off somewhere."

Like a zigzag, Aikawa-san laughed.

"That's why – no matter how much you ask Ichihime, you'll never find out the true motive. It's hard for her to really verbalize. What she thought as she threw herself into that is an eternal mystery."

"That's the same for anyone."

There cannot exist any two who can fully express themselves to each other. It is simply an issue of whether the two can believe that they can, whether they can dupe themselves into believing as such.

Probably, Aikawa-san nodded.

"So if I'm to say something roughly with some reasoning. She'd been calculating everything from the start. Drag me into it, embrace me, and then in the form of tricking me, pull me into her scheme. First, before there was that fuss about escaping, she took care of the dean and the other faculty. ... on a side note, they discovered a mass of dismembered corpses from the faculty room. Belonging to roughly thirty-seven people."

" ... "

I knew beforehand, but when given a number, I could do nothing but become agape. Thirty-seven – if you add Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan, and Origami Noa you would get forty. Even the human failure from the previous month had only gone a third of that.

To be honest, once the murdered go over ten or twenty, I lose the ability to perform proper valuation. Rather, I could almost feel some awe at Hime-chan for being able to pull that off in that sealed academy. A rather crass story.

One inside the sealed-off dean's room. Thirty-eight in the sealed area called the faculty ward. And then – within the sealed area known as the Hanging High School, forty.

A sealed dimension. From the outside, you could not know what was happening inside. Because it was a battlefield – because it was a sealed battlefield.

That was probably an extremely simple story.

A sealed room is a sealed room because it is sealed, but whether that is sealed toward the inside, or sealed toward the outside – changes everything.

That was why, more importantly, you would do that.

That action, could it be accepted?

What do you say. Failed product.

“Her Zig Zag was originally for going against masses of people, after all. And it's fundamentally not a tool of murder but rather a tool of capturing. String is more effective than rope at tying humans up. So, tie them up, and then cut them with a chainsaw. Hmm, and then. Take the dean's personal transmission device and communicate with Hagihara, and announce **Yukariki Ichihime's escape**. The scheme being discovered by the time you entered, wasn't because she screwed up, but because she'd let it out herself.”

“And that was where Aikawa-san was supposed to arrive.”

“But, I first sent you in. Ichihime was able to respond pretty well... but in the end, it was pretty dangerous. She got taken by surprise and was caught. And it wasn't like she could use Zig Zag in front of you.”

That was why... Hime-chan had pressed for staying in the classroom. But that could be rejected, I had already taken the initiative. Indeed, I was quite a miscalculation for Hime-chan.

“And then as she expected, I went to the dean's room to negotiate... even if you weren't around, this would always happen. It'd be one thing if we weren't discovered yet, but given that the escape was already known, I'd go to Noa's place. Hahah, she read me like a book.”

“Does that mean Hime-chan can imitate voices and read minds to some extent?”

"Well, yeah. But it's not like she's an apprentice of mine. And then with me, this is important, she discovers the dean. She became **a victim that had been framed.**"

"But that's a pretty dangerous ruse..."

"Better that it's dangerous, to Ichihime anyways. It's the same as hiding under the podium. It'd be harder to suspect her when it's that obvious. I did think the killing was similar to Zig Zag... but you start thinking that it might be a fake to frame her. And other such stupid things."

"Jun-san knew about **Zig Zag**, I see."

"Yeah. Ichihime seemed to want to hide it from you, so I didn't tell you. Aside from the fact that it's her trump card, it's also not really something you want people telling everyone. But, why did you realize that she's a string user? Saijou's case aside, when it comes to the dean's death, there's no need for a string user."

"My thoughts all came together. It was like a chain. I am the type where when I realize one thing I realize everything. One is all, all is one, of sorts. Of course the reverse is that if I never realize one, then I will never realize everything... But there is a reason. It was unnatural that she had so much string despite not being a string user. Hime-chan tried to cover it up with words, but you know. Even though it was the most effective way of escaping there... even though she had to use string to kill Tamamo-chan without me noticing... she was careless."

Though that was probably just her taking me lightly. But with regards to that, I could say nothing but that she was right to do so. If I did not think backwards from the truth about the sealed room, I would never have realized it.

"Also, she was paying too much attention to Shiogi-chan. Shiogi-chan's **strategy** was too elaborate for dealing with a failure. What was the reason that she did not just rely on mass, if you will. Of course, that was because numbers would only end badly against **Zig Zag.**"

"Mmm."

"And... someone trying to fool Aikawa Jun cannot be a failure. Similar to how a user of nonsense like myself cannot become an enemy of the mankind's strongest, a simple **Yukariki Ichihime** may be able to become Aikawa Jun's friend, but not an enemy. And of the remaining cast, the only remaining seat for Hime-chan to fit into was **Zig Zag**."

And – more than anything.

There cannot exist a cast member around me who is simply cute and weak and pitiable, and that conviction was the most important clue.

"I see. But it's not necessarily a lie that she's a failure. She... can't do anything aside from that trick."

"... for Jun-san to know obviously means... that Zig Zag was a skill she had acquired long before entering the academy... i assume."

"Pretty much. It was five years ago. I had an acquaintance that **failed at becoming** a string user – her nickname was **Zig Zag**. She used to be called something else. I paired up with her for a certain job. And at the time we rescued a twelve-year-old Yukariki Ichihime... after that, Ichihime looked up to her and I. I couldn't really pay her much attention, though..."

The frontal lobe damage must have occurred then. But that was not the question I needed to ask. The question I needed to ask was but one.

"And that person's name was Shisei Yuma."

"Hmm?" Aikawa-san looked up, surprised. "You know? She wasn't that famous."

"No... not really. And, that person..."

"Yup. Her Master." Aikawa-san laughed cynically. "And, a former teacher at Hanging High School. That was why Ichihime entered a middle school related to Hanging High School, and afterwards ended up where she did. Now, let's get the topic back. Umm, how much did I tell you already/ Right, right. The decision to become suspected with us. Yeah. she was right on target with the expectation that even if the door were closed, I could force it open. ... Jeez, she really loves coming up with little plots. You're pretty knowledgeable about the rest. So I'll skip everything after that."

"She did not want to be thought of as the suspect behind the dean's killing... but how about the mountain of dead faculty?"

"She probably thought that if she's not the suspect behind the dean, then she wouldn't be the one behind the other murders. But she definitely went too far. After you and Ichihime left, I was like bleh and left that room to look for you guys, and when I went to **greet** the faculty and went down the stairs... Hah. No matter how abnormal the Hanging High School is – the only one who could **do that** alone is Yukariki Ichihime."

That – was the point where everything cleared up. Not suspicion but rather trust, was why she was found out. But, even so, it was not like she could leave the faculty alive. Then Hime-chan's strategy was broken from the start.

..... No.

That is probably wrong. Aikawa-san probably – up to the hallway, when she heard Hime-chan and I's conversation, she truly did not realize the truth. Regardless of how she felt, I thought that must be the case.

This person is like that.

"But sealed room or whatever, I do not think such a thing has an effect. On anyone other than Jun-san."

"That's why all she had to do was trick me. Otherwise why would she need to kill you... ah, wait, there is a reason. You're annoying."

"... but, if she had not called Jun-san to the academy, there would never have been a need to cover it. Rather than hang onto a secret that may be found out, she chose a definitive way of deceiving... and then **the more you plan, the more you succumb to your plan.**"

"Or you know. A long time ago, I made a promise, with her. When she became Shisei's apprentice. That she wouldn't use Zig Zag for killing people."

"But, that skill... ahh. It was originally self-defense for capturing."

That was why she wanted to hide it from Jun-san... that probably was not all, but it sounded like at least part of the reason. Motives for murder tend to be a mixing pot of complex thoughts, and it is difficult to put into words the reason... but one would be Hime-chan's master, Shisei Yuma, and another would be Aikawa Jun, I could say that much with absolution.

"But the academy didn't allow that... or rather, why would someone like that enter a school, you'd think. Hurry up and get over someone who's dead... stupid brat."

Shisei Yuma – well, I had figured as much.

"Well, the dean and Shisei, I guess if you think along that line you can get what the gist of what she was thinking – nah, I still can't."

"But – if I may, Jun-san, you are too soft. What is your mind-reading for? In retrospect, that sealed room, could not have been the doing of anyone other than Hime-chan–"

"You didn't notice either."

"I am just a fool."

Or rather, from my perspective it was no time to be solving riddles.

"Hah. I'm not **Maeda Keiji Toshimasu**, but rather than suspect people in the name of safety, I feel better trusting and then being betrayed."

Aikawa-san laughed, showing no hint of remorse. She did not seem to be regretting anything, and she did not seem to be hurt any.

"—Jun-san, what is the truth?"

"Nothing. Me liking Ichihime, and Ichihime's actions have no relation. Hahah, that's why I'm not mad that Ii-tan came close to betraying me."

She saw through me.

"But you're carefree, too. When you were about to die, you were fine with selling out Ichihime. What do you mean, come to my place. You betrayed her five minutes ago!"

Completely through me.

"I did not feel like I betrayed..."

... in the end, Aikawa-san's **soft on friends** was just her expecting too much from the world. Because she is so talented, she could not understand weaklings like Hime-chan and I. And even though she did not understand, she felt no need to compromise.

"Leaving aside me being soft, you couldn't support her beliefs, either. When you're in such a murderer-training facility, anyone would end up like that. Anyone would think about doing such a thing. And Ichihime had the skills to pull it off. That's all."

"Skills..."

"When you think about her abnormal stature, you can figure what sort of life she lived, can't you? She only weighs thirty kilograms, you know? Although I guess you wouldn't get it, because you know Kunagisa-chan. Although Ichihime and Kunagisa have different circumstances."

"...."

"But I'm not telling you to sympathize. But, just because you hate like things, don't rag on her too much."

"I had no intention of ragging on her. This time I was completely absent and unrelated, after all. If it were not for you dragging me into it, I could not care less who did what."

"That's good."

In any case, Hime-chan... was unable to escape from that place alone. Zig Zag was indeed an effective skill, but it is fundamentally a defensive skill. Unless she sets up a trap and waits, like she did with Shiogi-chan, it was no different than using a knife. As long as it is not a surprise attack, you did not need to be Aikawa-san to evade. That was why – yes, it was the same as Aikawa-san's tactic – first you strike the core. Massacre the faculty, then get Aikawa-san's help...

"No... things do not add up. If she simply wanted to escape, she could have just left it to Jun-san. That would have been plenty. She wanted to kill, that must have been the primary motive. If her Master's death had something to do with the changing of deans, then she may have even entered the school with the intent of killing."

"I wouldn't say they're unrelated... but I think that's thinking too much--"

If she wanted to just kill, then Hime-chan alone was sufficient. But she needed Aikawa-san's help for escaping afterwards. She wanted Aikawa-san to help her escape after murder, but also, prevent that Aikawa-san from seeing through the murders. That was why the plan was completely zigzag and paradoxical – but in any case, that must have been the concept behind Hime-chan's strategy.

"Or alternatively, she may have wanted me to see through the killing," Aikawa-san said. "Confession of guilt, something like that? Pretty stupid, though."

Ahh... that did seem the most likely. Perform her goal completely, then be punished by Aikawa-san. Even to a person like myself, such a concept was seductive. If you are going to be killed – then at the hands of the most precious of existences.

A confused desire after exhausting every scheme.

Because I was unable to select my friends, at the very least, I wanted to choose the enemy that would eradicate me.

"She deceived with the intent to be discovered all along... but that is too irresponsible."

"Responsible... strange word."

"Yes. I do not really understand it."

"Yeah. I don't really get it. You know, she might have just wanted to place with me. At the very end."

At the very end...

She had no intention of living, or hiding, from the start... I could not think that to be the case, but I also could not refute that possibility. I could not understand

Hime-chan's feelings to the end. Just the same that I still cannot understand what **that** is thinking.

– a waste of thought.

The story of the defeated is never told.

Warriors die in battle, strategist die in confusion.¹⁾

In conclusion.

Hime-chan was not a replacement for **that**. That much was certain. Kunagisa Tomo – did not break that easily.

"Well, if you theorize this much, you probably hit somewhere."

And then silence befell the hospital room. Aikawa-san ate the apple down to its core, and then stuck her hand back into the basket.

"Hmm – you're gonna eat this?"

Aikawa-san pulled out from the basket a 5x5x5 Rubiks' Cube just the size of an apple.

"No, that is a toy that Kunagisa left behind when she came to visit. I cannot solve it, so I left it there."

"She came to visit? She can't climb stairs alone outside of home, can she?"

"She said she was carried here by a friend named **Hii-chan**."

"Ah, so that's why Ii-tan's in a bad mood..."

As she spoke, Aikawa-san solved the cube without even looking at it, and then placed it back in the fruit basket. And then, "but still," she said. Her lackadaisical attitude alerted me that we were finally going to talk about why she had come.

"This time, finally, I've figured out that special trait of yours."

"My trait? Shiogi-chan called it **Aimless Equation**."

"Ahh... yeah. Honestly, I'm regretting it a bit. That bringing you into this incident this time was a mistake. Right? If it weren't for you, Hagihara Shiogi and Saijou Tamamo wouldn't have died. Ichihime wanted to avoid killing **students** whom were in the same situation as her, after all. **Faculty** were there of their own accord, but – **students** had no other choice."

Shiogi-chan was saying that **she could not imagine a more suitable place** – but I can say with certainty. There probably is. Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan simply did not know. They simply could not find other goals and purposes. I simply could not tell them answers.

"But saying that the two died was my fault is going too far. It had nothing to do with me."

"Catastrophes always occur around you, and people always die around you. You – how should I put it, you **make it so people can't relax**. You freak them out. That's why, people around you are forced into situations they would never usually find themselves in – and as a result, they show cracks. That's why I used you this time – but that trait identify friend or foe. Ichihime was dragged into it, too. Ichihime killed Tamamo for **your** safety, and the reason she killed Shiogi, more than **because the truth was found**, but rather to save you, because you were **becoming very intimate** with a strategist after being captured to let her escape – right? Ichihime just wanted to hide the crimes from me, and once the bodies are found, the sealed room doesn't matter."

"... I see, that is one way of looking at it."

"Just by being there, you startle others, just by being there, you make people lose their grip on themselves... there're a bunch of people like that. You can't

relax when you're with them, it annoys you, things don't go as planned... people like that, you know, they're even scientifically explainable. In other words, **the missing part**. Because the missing part for the observer ends up looking the same, it feels like the person is having their ineptitude pointed out to them, and it startles them. Some think that's a romantic feeling, and some think that's enmity. The former are the type that wants to lick each other's wounds, the latter hates similar types. You're a high-end version of that. You yourself don't have any characteristics and aren't anything like anyone – but you have too many **missing parts**. That's why you're just like everyone. And that picks at peoples' subconscious, that's why you're aimless. And yet **you still manage to come out on top**. You don't stand up to it nor do you parry it, and yet somehow you welcome it. You let them do as they want and then flip it around and evade. You wave around your nonsense and then escape and escape and run away. Even though you being there makes them anxious – no one around you can touch you. It's no different than being next to a ghost or a demon. That's why the gears always mess up around you, and switches are flicked. Think about April, think about May.”

“I said it to Shiogi-chan too, but... you are greatly overvaluing me.” I shook my head. “I am nothing that big. I just get tossed about by the currents.”

“If there is any hope of salvation...”

Ignoring my retort, Aikawa-san continued.

“It's that you have no motive. To be honest, I'm a bit scared. If you ever find a goal... if you ever point **somewhere**, what'll happen. When something like that happens, the only ones who won't get affected are guys exactly like you, like Zerzaki-kun. If someone's even slightly different... which means everyone, they'll go insane. On a level far beyond anything up to this point, you'll drag everyone into chaos, causing accidents one after another.”

Yes – just like.

When I broke Kunagisa Tomo.

"You make it sound like a horror novel."

I joked, but Aikawa-san's expression remained unchanged–

As she raised her index finger.

"– that's why, I think it's not a bad idea to kill you now."

And then she lowered her finger.

"..."

Nothing – happened.

Nothing, happened.

"... that is a rough joke."

"Joke? A joke?"

Aikawa-san looked incredibly astonished.

"Of course, yeah. I want that."

"...."

"Hahah. I mean, if you disappear, who's gonna be my straightman?"

And then she stood up and said cynically, "oh well, I'll head back now," and folded the seat back up and placed it where it originally was. And she plucked out another apple, like payment for leaving, and

"If the strings of fate would like to entangle us once again. Super misfortune and pathetic fortune to your future."

She was about to leave the hospital room.

I asked, to her back.

"Hime-chan--"

"Hmm? What about Ichihime?"

"Why did she called me **that way**?"

"That's easy. Or, rather," Aikawa-san responded by asking back, "Don't you get why she was hiding her identity as Zig Zag from you? Aside from mental issues, there's nothing to be lost by you knowing that she's the string user, but up to the very bitter end, she tried to act like a simple failure. You really don't get why?"

"... I do not," after all I was the one who asked, so I hunched over, shirking my eyes from Aikawa-san. "Maybe she just wanted to let down my guard? As long as she acts like a dumb high school girl, I would not be as wary of her."

"Nah, idiot. Hah, it means you overlapped. Mr. I'm like no one but I'm like everyone. She placed the image over you--" Aikawa-san mischievously laughed.

"The same way you projected Kunagisa Tomo onto her. It was an amazing display of misunderstanding."

The same way I saw Kunagisa in Hime-chan.

Hime-chan saw something in me.

"..... Will I be able to see Hime-chan again?"

"Don't worry. Even if you don't want to, you'll see her soon."

And with that, the contractor disappeared from my sight. Like always, at the end of the end, she would rustle my mind, and then leave. Even though she did not

solve a mystery that seemed like it had already been solved this time, she left behind new things to ponder.

Indeed... the empress of making you think, the queen of deep meaning behind her words, Her Majesty of suggestion, she raises all sorts of flags and leaves them be. After all, aside from Tamamo-chan's case, she had completely rewritten the situation behind Shiogi-chan's death, too, I wanted to point out.

"Not having any characteristics means that people can say whatever they want about you... Gosh, everyone and everyone expects too much from me... give me a break."

I am just a somewhat talkative delusional, defective, emo nineteen-year-old.

As I was thinking such things, as if coming in to switch places with Aikawa-san, my nurse walked in with a food tray. It seemed Aikawa-san had noticed the nurse's presence and decided to leave. She was like a ninja.

"That cool beauty that just walked out of here like a new **Stand** user, who was that? Iiii's visitor?"

The nurse asked with significant interest as she glanced at the door behind her.

"Iiii's big sister? Cousin?"

It seemed being a relative would be the easiest excuse.

"... Ahh, girlfriend, she is my girlfriend."

"Eeehhh?"

She was obviously dubious.

"You know, she is completely infatuated with me. Gosh, it is quite a bother, you know, she even forced herself all the way here. I would much rather be alone when I am hospitalized."

"Yes yes. I unnastaaaaan."

The nurse clearly did not believe me.

"Despite her looks, when we are alone, she is ridiculous. She does everything I ask."

"Huh huh right right. I get it already. Iiii so attractive with the ladies."

She said as she placed the plastic tray on the table.

"Love~ ♪ Love love~ ♪"

Did this hospital have a reason in mind when hiring such unique nurses? I started getting annoyed (or rather I felt if this continued I would feel more sorry for myself) and decided to change the subject.

"Nurse, do you read mystery novels?"

"I'm a nurse practitioner!" she corrected me. That was basically just the difference a strategist and a tactician - how small-minded. "Well, I do, but what do you want?"

"A quiz," I said, as I picked up the envelope Aikawa-san had left behind and checked its contents. "There is a room. The room is protected by a palm-checking ID lock, and so without being the room's inhabitant you cannot open or lock the door from outside. Now, one day, you, and two of your friends, three in total, come to that room. The room was locked, so you forced your way in, and you found the corpse of the inhabitant sliced to bits."

"Ahh, a sealed room mystery. How nostalgic," the nurse smiled. "Palm... reminds me of Lupin III."

"Now, how did the suspect perform this impossible task?"

"Hmm. Ah, I know. Simple, simple," the nurse said after preparing the meal, and she turned to me, "They dismembered the victim inside the room, and then took just one of the hands from the dismembered corpse, stepped outside, and locked the door with it, right? Dismembering the corpse was camouflage, and they actually just wanted the hand. In other words, the door's key is just the palm, and as long as you do it right after they die, it still reacts to the lock. Nyahahah, now I want a cat's palm, get it?"

"...."

"If you see a dismembered corpse in front of you, you panic a bit and don't realize that one part is missing, after all. That's why one of the three is the suspect. Probably the last one to enter. Until they, they hid it in like a pouchette, and while the other two are surprised by the corpse, they leave the hand in the corner of the room. Wham. Pretty simple trick."

"...."

While listening to the nurse's answer – I was mesmerized by the content of the envelope. It was a lot of cash – and, one photo. That was, probably, what she had collected from Hime-chan after she had swiped it from my shirt. That photo.

That photo where Hime-chan was smiling, without any acting.

"Don't worry. Even if you don't want to, you'll see her soon."

I see, contractor.

You – really get it.

You pull off some of the cleverest tricks.

I do not know what went through Hime-chan's mind when she swiped this photo from me. I do not know, but I sort of understand. You could say this is a memory. A memory of when Aikawa-san and Hime-chan met. A memory that went by the name "the past," – one that was totally different from the future, and could not be called hazy.

"Mmm? Hey, hey, when people are responding to a boring quiz, don't go off chewing up a photo, Iiii. Who's that, your girlfriend?"

"Does this one look like a girlfriend..." I wondered what this nurse thought I am.

"No. This is just... a friend."

"For a friend it looked like you were looking at her rather lovingly. Like you were looking at a daughter or an apprentice."

"Do you think so? ... Perhaps."

Hime-chan taking this from me was perhaps the only falsification that was unrelated to crime and murder. It was an action that had absolutely no malice. Hime-chan probably wanted this herself, and took it from me. Then Hime-chan would have to come before me once more, to reclaim this photo. I do not know where Hime-chan is right now and what she is doing – nor do I know what Aikawa-san plans to do with Hime-chan... but if that is the percentages, then I am fine giving up in the name of being deceived.

Hime-chan cannot be a replacement for that, but – well, that is that, and I would like to teach Hime-chan some things.

Yes, for instance, how to use nonsense.

Because Hime-chan, like me – needs a teacher for falsification.

"Hmm. If you say so. Well, not that it matters. What's the answer to the quiz?
That was correct, right? Hey, Iiii,answer me."

The nurse leaned in, asking. I irritably waved my hand to distance her, and answered. Of course, there is no rejecting the answer. There exists no person in the world who cannot solve this pitiful quiz—

Well, aside from one.

Mankind's strongest and, too softhearted.

"Completely wrong. You are a horrible person, suspecting your friend."

"Big liar."

"Yeah."

¹⁾ It's also a subtle pun in Japanese. 戦士 (warrior/senshi) 戦死 (death in battle/senshi) 策士 (strategist/sakushi) 錯死 (confused death/sakushi).